LETTERS

ON

ENGLISH POETRY.

LETTERS

TO

A YOUNG LADY

ON A

COURSE

OF

ENGLISH POETRY.

BY J. AIKIN, M. D.

......Hail, ye mighty masters of the lay,
Nature's true sons, the friends of man and truth,
Whose song, sublimely sweet, serenely gay,
Amused my childhood, and inform'd my youth:
For well I know, wherever ye reside,
There harmony, and peace, and innocence abide.

Minstrel.

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LET-

LETTERS
ON
A COURSE
OF
ENGLISH POETRY.

LETTER I.

MY DEAR MARY,

WHEN I congratulated you on the elegant present you had received of a set of the English Poets, I did not foresee that I was laying myself open to a request on your part of no trifling extent. You desire that "I would instruct you in the most profitable use of a treasure which I have represented as so valuable." I cannot affirm either that the wish itself is unreasonable, or that your claim upon me to gratify it, as far as I am able, is in any respect defective. The tie of affection and kindred is

strong enough to bear the injunction of a task much less agreeable to my taste than this will be; though the time it will occupy is a consideration of some moment. For, in a cursory way to give you my opinion on the merits of our principal poets, would be very imperfectly fulfilling the purpose of your request; which comprehends, as I understand it, such directions for a course of poetical reading, as may best conduce to the forming of your taste and cultivating your understanding.

These are the objects which I shall attempt to attain; and as this cannot be effected in the compass of two or three sheets, you must patiently prepare yourself for the perusal of a *series of letters*, which may amount altogether to a moderate sized volume: so, you see that the task you have imposed upon me recoils with no small weight upon yourself. I shall not, however, increase the burthen by any grave lectures upon the moral use of poetry. I take it for granted that you are already well grounded

grounded in the principles of morality, and therefore may be trusted to extract what is most valuable from a set of authors who, in general, are friends to virtue and decorum, while you pass lightly and unhurt over the dubious matter which may be mingled with the rest. Yet I shall not neglect to point out to you, as we pass, such works and passages as you may dwell upon with most advantage to your moral as well as to your literary taste; and, on the other hand, shall suppress in merited oblivion all such pieces as appear entirely unfit for your perusal.

There is one particular topic, however, concerning which I feel a degree of hesitation. Poetry has in all ages and countries been the servant and interpreter of *love:* from that passion it has received some of its most rapturous inspiration, and to its interests has devoted its choicest powers. The strains of love are not only occasionally met with in the works of the poets: they are the animating soul of many, and are intimately blended with almost all. Is

there not danger, then, in lending to an affection already, perhaps, too seductive to a young and susceptible mind, the auxiliary allurements of eloquence and harmony? I will not affirm that such danger is altogether imaginary; but, in my opinion, love in poetry is a more harmless thing than love in prose. The more of fancy is mixed with it—the more it is removed from common life—the less is its influence over the heart and the conduct; and it is probable that the refinement and elevation of sentiment fostered by a taste for poetry may prove a protection from that light and vulgar passion which enters merely at the eyes, and is too sensual to be disgusted with coarseness and stupidity. Since, then, it is impossible to separate love from poetry, I shall not fear to recommend it to your notice in its purest, most tender, and fanciful form. Poets themselves, who have written upon it all their lives, have very soberly felt its influence.

As it will be my plan to aim at forming your taste by practice only, that is, by familiarising

miliarising you with the perusal of the best models, I shall also spare you the tediousness of any preliminary discussions of the theoretical kind concerning the abstract nature of poetry in general, and its several species. Opportunities will be offered, as we proceed, of making some remarks on these points, with the advantage of immediate illustration by examples; the sole mode in which they can be rendered interesting. It is enough if you set out with the persuasion, that there is something in the measured succession of sounds called *verse*, which has in all nations and languages been found agreeable to the ear, and a means of impressing the sense of words upon the mind with peculiar force and sweetness. To assist you in acquiring an ear for the melody of verse, will therefore be the first object of my directions: but I reserve my practical commencement for a second letter; and in the meantime remain,

Yours very affectionately,

J. A.

LETTER II.

MY DEAR PUPIL,

As it is my wish as soon as possible to habituate your ear to the melody of versification, I shall totally disregard the chronological order in which the productions of English poetry have made their appearance, and at once introduce you to those perfect examples of the art, which necessarily imply many previous attempts. The poet, therefore, whom I shall first recommend to your notice is the correct and harmonious POPE, the master of the modern school of English versifiers; and I shall initiate you by the perusal of those of his works which will least occupy your attention on any other account than the music of their strains.

His "Pastorals" were a production of his early youth, formed upon models left us by the antients, and aspiring to little more than

than the praise of elegant imitation. In many respects they show the immature age of the writer, but not in their versification, which possesses a degree of excellence scarcely surpassed by himself in his mature performances. The measure is of the kind termed heroic, as being principally employed upon grave and elevated topics. In its most regular form, it consists of ten syllables, alternately short and long, constituting what in Greek and Latin poetry are called Iambic feet. You will perceive that the voice in general lays a light stress upon every other syllable, which produces a sort of undulating motion in the whole, resembling the flow of waves. This is a very simple melody, yet, when well managed, is sufficiently agreeable. I question not that you will immediately *feel* the sweetness of verses like these:

> Go, gentle gales, and bear my sighs along!
> The birds shall cease to tune their evening song,
> The winds to breathe, the waving woods to move,
> And streams to murmur, ere I cease to love.

These Pastorals contain a great many

pretty

pretty lines, a general elegance and splendour of diction, but very little original imagery. It is remarkable that a young poet, brought up in a rural retreat, should have viewed nature so little with his own eyes. But he was a very early student of poetry, and imitation took place in him of observation. He had, however, the good taste to make a selection of the most pleasing images; and the objects he paints, though common, are represented with truth and beauty. The bright touches of a poetical pencil are conspicuous in the following lines:

> Where *dancing sun-beams* on the waters play'd,
> And verdant alders formed a *quiv'ring shade.*

Here you see, superadded to the melody of numbers, that choice of appropriate circumstances which gives life and animation to description, and which is one of the essential qualities of poetry, though it also belongs to good writing in general.

The last of these pieces, the sacred eclogue of "Messiah," will doubtless strike

you

you as written in a more lofty strain than the rest. In fact, it deserts the scenery and sentiment proper to pastoral, and borrows its imagery and language from the sublime conceptions of the Hebrew bards. It was, indeed, a noble foretaste of what the young poet was destined to be, and showed that grandeur was not less his characteristic than elegance. It has been objected to Pope's versification, that he too uniformly concludes a sentence, or at least a clause, within the limits of a couplet, so that the stop regularly falls upon the second rhyming word. It is perhaps right that this should be the common structure of rhymed heroics, since it gives the clearest perception of the measure; yet to break it occasionally and with judgment, relieves the ear from a tiresome monotony. Of this a happy example is afforded in the following passage of the Messiah:

> But lost, dissolv'd in thy superior rays,
> One tide of glory, one unclouded blaze
> O'erflow thy courts.

This *overflow* of the measure is not only agreeable to the ear, but has a sort of correspondence with the sense.

"Windsor Forest," another juvenile production of this writer, bears no mean rank among descriptive poems. There is less of local scenery in the description than might have been expected from one who passed much of his youth within the purlieus of the forest; and the subjects are chiefly drawn from rural life in general, or from historic incidents. The pictures of country sports, and the lively sketches of the animals which are the objects of them, never fail to give pleasure to a young reader. The latter part of the poem, however, containing the personification and prediction of "old father Thames," is in a strain greatly superior to the rest, and strongly marks the developement of the author's genius in the nine years which intervened between the composition of the two portions. It would be difficult from the whole range of descriptive poetry to produce

produce a finer passage than that following the lines,

> The time shall come, when free as seas or wind
> Unbounded Thames shall flow for all mankind.

The next piece inserted in the works of our poet comes opportunely to give you a taste of a new kind of composition, and new modes of versification. This is the "Ode for St. Cecilia's Day;" a poem intended to be set to music, as were originally all those termed *lyric*, although at present they are frequently written without any such intention. They are all, however, expected to contain a species of music in themselves; that is, so to adapt the measure to the subject, as to accompany the changes of sense in the words, with correspondent changes of modulation in the verse. This *music of poetry* is reducible to no determinate rules, and different ears form very different conclusions respecting it: indeed, it is possible for a skilful reader to give almost what expression he

pleases

pleases to any combination of long and short syllables. Yet it is certain that some are naturally better suited than others to particular emotions of the mind; and the opposite extremes of light and solemn, cheerful and plaintive, are capable of being marked with sufficient distinctness.

How far the various melodies of verse can be made to coincide with the proper music of notes and tones, I confess myself unable to judge; but I cannot observe without disgust what effusions of nonsense and vulgarity are usually preferred by musical composers as the vehicles of their finest airs. The musician probably wishes to have the words so pliant as to conform to all the changes of strain which the rules of his art may require; but poetry and sense are not of so accommodating a nature. Pope's Ode, I believe, never acquired fame as a musical performance: as an experiment in the art of versification, it certainly deserves attention. You will remark that it begins with an imitation of sounds alone.

There

There is danger in such an attempt, lest, by aiming to approach too near, sense should be too much neglected, and the words should catch an air of the burlesque. Thus a great poet has given "The double, double, double beat of the thund'ring drum." Pope, however, has avoided anything so extravagant, and his first stanza *seems* to imitate very happily the music it describes. He proceeds to the imitation of action and sentiment, and the antient story of Orpheus and Eurydice is the principal frame for the expression. The story has been better told by other poets; for every thing is here made subservient to those changes of situation and passion which may display the writer's art in the adaptation of suitable measures. In some of these efforts he has been thought successful; in others much the reverse: but I do not wish to prompt your judgment by the opinion of others. Read and feel for yourself.

The two "Choruses for the Tragedy of Brutus" which follow, were also intended to be set to music. They are probably too

replete with thought for this purpose; but this is no objection to them, considered as poems to be read. They are very elegant pieces; and the touching picture of connubial love in the second of them deserves great praise as a moral painting. With respect to the peculiar structure of the stanzas, and the application of the antique terms of chorus and semi-chorus, strophe and anti-strophe, I shall make no remarks at present. Lyrical poetry, to which they belong, will be more fully considered hereafter.

I do not mean to lead you without intermission through the works of this charming author; but in order to render your ear perfectly familiar with the *tune*, as it may be called, of his versification, I shall desire you not to lay him down till you have perused two or three more of his pieces in that measure of which he was the greatest master, the heroic.

His "Elegy to the Memory of an unfortunate Lady" is a very finished composition, and has, perhaps, more of the pathetic than

than any thing he has written besides; for in that quality he does not abound. You will perceive a fine effect from that artifice of writing, the *repetition* of words particularly energetic, in the following lines:

By *foreign hands* thy dying eyes were clos'd,
By *foreign hands* thy decent limbs compos'd,
By *foreign hands* thy humble grave adorn'd,
By *strangers* honour'd, and by *strangers* mourn'd.

Examples of that sententious brevity which peculiarly distinguished our poet, are found in this piece, which does not in the least partake of the character of feebleness usually imputed to elegy. No writer has made such advantage of the obligation imposed by rhyme-couplets of comprising a sense within the limits of one or two verses: he has derived from it a nervous conciseness beyond the powers of prose, or blank verse. What can surpass the fulness and energy of meaning in such lines as these?

And curs'd with hearts unknowing how to yield.—
Grieve for an hour, perhaps, then mourn a year.—
'Tis all thou art, and all the proud shall be.—

It

It is manifest that this kind of excellence cannot be attained without unremitting care and diligence; and no man ever bestowed more of these upon his productions than Pope.

The "Temple of Fame" is a composition of a very different kind. Poetry appears in it drest in that garb of fiction which may be called its holiday suit, but which by some has been represented as its proper and distinguishing habit. The writer has here borrowed the invention of an older poet; but he has so much improved the design, and filled it up with so many beauties of his own growth, that his work may almost claim the merit of an original. The idea of the Temple of Fame is an allegorical fiction; that is, a fable or story, formed upon the conversion of the abstract quality, Fame, into a person, and assigning her a local habitation, with attendants, votaries, and the like. You will hereafter find the poets abounding in such creations of the fancy, by which they gain the advantage

vantage of entertaining their readers with novelties—with things, as Milton expresses it, "beyond this visible diurnal sphere," which gratify the natural passion for wonder, and produce scenes of splendour and sublimity superior to those presented by mere reality.

I do not mean to trouble you with a commentary on this piece, which, in fact, is less admirable for its allegorical justness, than for the particular beauties of its description. In the latter respect, very few works of poetry surpass it; and though it was a juvenile performance of the author's, it affords examples of his very best manner. You cannot pass over without admiration the simile of the ice-mountains, which presents a winter landscape of wonderful brilliancy:

> So Zembla's rocks, the beauteous work of frost,
> Rise white in air, and glitter o'er the coast;
> Pale suns, unfelt, at distance roll away,
> And on th' impassive ice the lightnings play.

I know not whether you are sufficiently

advanced in general reading to judge of the figures of heroes, philosophers, and poets, with which his temple is so nobly decorated; but where you are acquainted with the characters, you will not fail of being struck with the spirit and justness of the portraitures. Homer, Virgil, and Pindar are drawn with singular force and skill. The conclusion of the piece, relative to his own views as a candidate for fame, is entirely his own, and moralizes with true dignity.

If, in addition to the works above pointed out, you will read the two beautiful translations from Ovid, "the Fable of Dryope," and "Vertumnus and Pomona," you will have acquired a full perception of the melody of versification, and the clearness and splendour of diction, which are some of the most essential qualities of fine poetry. And having gained this point, I think it advisable no longer to confine you to this one writer, lest, fascinated by his beauties, you fix your taste so exclusively upon him,

as to regard every deviation from his manner as a defect. You will therefore lay him down for the present, and in my next letter I will introduce you to one of his competitors in poetic fame.

Farewell, &c.

LETTER

LETTER III.

Pursuing my first idea of habituating you to the numbers and the language of poetry as exhibited in the best models, I no , my dear Mary, carry you back to one who is regarded as the master of Pope, and whom many think his superior. This is the celebrated Dryden, a name scarcely second to any among the English poets, and the fertile author of compositions, many of which, from an unfortunate choice of topics, are almost sunk into oblivion, or are remembered chiefly by their titles. The seriousness of his temper, and strong party attachments, engaged him in political and religious controversy, and the necessities under which he laboured made him a venal trader in adulation. Hence he incurred a great waste of genius, and threw away upon temporary and unworthy topics, exertions which would have served to delight future ages.

Of the works which still attract the notice of readers of poetry, the principal are his "Fables;" pieces formed upon the stories of early writers, and modernized with a free hand. Although these were composed at an advanced period of life, and indeed as a task for money, yet, such was the vigour of his genius, that they possess all the warmth of diction and facility of invention which distinguished his best days. The characteristics of Dryden are richness and freedom. His versification is much more varied than that of Pope. The pauses in the lines are placed with less uniformity; the sense of one line or couplet more frequently overflows to the next; triplets, or three successive rhymes, are often introduced; and alexandrines, or lines lengthened to twelve syllables, are scattered throughout. His poetical diction or style partakes of a similar variety. It is sometimes elevated and adorned with the most splendid figures; but its habitual cast is that of energy and animation, supported by the

free use of common words, which, if strong and expressive, are not rejected on account of a degree of coarseness. It is therefore well fitted for narration; and scarcely any poems of this class are to be found, which paint action and scenery on the reader's imagination in such lively colours as his Tales. It is, however, to be remarked, that no writer was ever less careful to preserve proprieties of manners and character than this poet, and that his violations of the *costume* surpass all allowable bounds. This defect, indeed, is in great part derived from the authors whom he paraphrased, who were chiefly those of a rude and tasteless age.

The "Knight's Tale," or "Palamon and Arcite," taken from Chaucer, which I shall first recommend to your perusal, strangely attributes the manners of chivalry to the times and persons of remote classical antiquity. But after the reader has acquiesced in this leading incongruity, he cannot fail to receive much entertainment from the richness of the scenery and variety of the

adventures;

adventures; and as a study in the poetical art, few pieces in the English language deserve more attention. Dryden was versed in the learning of the schools, and was fond on all occasions of pouring forth his knowledge upon abstruse and speculative points. You will therefore find, intermixed with the description and sentiment proper to the story, many allusions relative to astronomy, theology, metaphysics, and other branches of philosophy, which perhaps you may think tedious. But in proportion as you have acquired a taste for poetry, you will dwell with delight and admiration upon his creations of the fancy, some of which are equally bold in the conception, and vivid in the representation. The temples of Venus and Mars are draughts of this kind, finely contrasted: the latter, especially, abounds with allegorical figures which, in the painter's phrase, perfectly start from the canvas. The purely narrative part of the tale flows easy and copious; and though protracted with great variety of circum-

stance,

stance, keeps up the interest to the very conclusion.

Of the other tales, " the Cock and the Fox" will entertain you by its description of familiar objects; but you will wonder to find so much reading and argumentation put into the mouths of barn-door fowl. Dryden, as well as some other writers, seems to have thought the character of that kind of fiction termed *fable*, sufficiently preserved, if the actions belong to the animals which are the personages of the story, while the language and sentiments are those of human beings. It is true, supposing them to converse at all, is giving them the principal attribute of man; yet the most correct fabulists limit their discourse to the mere illustration of the moral intended to be exemplified, and make them as nearly as possible utter the sense of a bird or beast that should be inspired with the gift of language. Dryden's Cock and Hen have all the knowledge which he himself possessed, and quote fathers and schoolmen

just

just as in his "Hind and Panther" (a piece which I do not recommend to you, notwithstanding its temporary fame) all the arguments in the controversy between papists and protestants are inserted in a dialogue between those two animals. He has contrived, however, in the present tale to make the absurdity sufficiently amusing, and it has many lines worth remembering. The theory of the production of dreams has often been quoted:

> Dreams are but interludes which fancy makes:
> While monarch reason sleeps, this mimic wakes;
> Compounds a medley of disjointed things,
> A mob of coblers, and a court of kings.

The Vision entitled "The Flower and the Leaf" is not very interesting as an allegory: it however contains much brilliant description. The picture of Spring with which it commences is uncommonly beautiful, and, upon a trite subject, is marked with the originality of genius.

The "Character of a Good Parson" is an admirable piece of moral portraiture:

 piety

piety and virtue have seldom been painted in a form more dignified and amiable. The allusion to the well-known fable of the sun, wind and traveller, is very ingenious and poetical.

In his story of "Theodore and Honoria" the poet gives a specimen of his powers in the *terrific*. I shall not diminish the curiosity with which you will peruse this "tale of wonder" by anticipating its circumstances; but I would bespeak your attention to some lines which have been justly noted as containing one of the finest examples of the verse modulated to the subject. They are these:

> Whilst listening to the murmuring leaves he stood,
> More than a mile immers'd within the wood,
> At once the wind was laid; the whispering sound
> Was dumb; a rising earthquake rock'd the ground:
> With deeper brown the grove was overspread;
> A sudden horror seized his giddy head,
> And his ears tinkled, and his colour fled.

Your ear cannot fail to mark that skilful variation of the pauses, which makes the

the reader feel, as it were, his breath suspended, in expectation of the coming scene.

"Cymon and Iphigenia," an entertaining story poetically related, may conclude your progress through Dryden's Fables. An example of his art of versification will probably strike you in this triplet:

The fanning wind upon her bosom blows,
To meet the fanning wind the bosom rose,
The fanning wind and purling stream continue her repose.

A very elegant moral sentiment is contained in the following couplet:

Love taught him shame; and shame, with love at strife,
Soon taught the sweet civilities of life.

I reserve for you, before taking leave of this illustrious poet, that production of his which has obtained the greatest share of popularity, and is usually placed at the head of a class in English poetry: this is "Alexander's Feast, or the Power of Music." I have already, in reference to Pope's Ode for St. Cecilia's Day, made a few remarks concerning

concerning lyric poetry properly so called, or that which is intended for association with music. That before us was written on the same occasion, and the whole art of the poet has been employed to accommodate it to musical expression. The subject is peculiarly happy, as being a striking example of that influence of music over the passions which it was the business of the day to celebrate. Narration and imitation go hand in hand; and the manner of relating the effects produced, tells at the same time how they were produced. The changes of measure seem to flow spontaneously from those in the action. Perhaps it would not be easy to show the exact and exclusive adaptation of each strain to its particular subject; yet in general the ear is satisfied, and recognizes that concordance between the sound and the sense which it was the poet's aim to exhibit. In some instances this is peculiarly happy; and it has been a favourite trial of skill in recitation to give an adequate vocal expression to the most

most distinguished passages of this ode. There is an air of freedom and facility in the whole, which renders probable the tradition that it was "struck off at a heat;" whereas the ode of Pope on the same occasion bears all the marks of study and labour.

The universal applause with which this piece has been received, is a proof how much more congenial to the mind is the interest arising from an historical fact, than that excited by mythological or allegorical fiction. Its effect is obviously enhanced by that rapid uninterrupted flow of narration, which does not suffer the reader's attention to flag, but carries him on from scene to scene with unchecked ardour. It has that unity of subject which is essential to the production of warm emotions; and in this respect, Dryden's Alexander's Feast is widely different in its construction from the generality of lyric poems, in which the rule seems to have been, to introduce as much variety as possible, with the most sudden

sudden and unexpected transitions. You will hereafter have an opportunity of observing the performance of great masters upon this plan. I might, indeed, refer you to the practice of Dryden himself, in his "Ode to the Memory of Mrs. Killegrew;" a composition which no less a judge than Dr. Johnson has pronounced one of the finest of its class in the English language. I know not that it has received such commendation from any other modern critic; and to me, I confess, it appears such a medley of extravagance and conceit, that I can only account for the favour it has met with from the eminent writer above mentioned, upon the supposition of its having fallen in with one of those early associations, which are continually imposing prejudices upon us in the shape of judgments.

But it is time now to close my lecture: so adieu!

Your truly affectionate, &c.

LETTER IV.

SUPPOSING my pupil to be well grounded in the harmony and diction of Dryden and Pope, I now proceed to put into her hands other standard writers, who rank in the same poetical class, though they have reached only an inferior point of excellence.

The courtly WALLER, to whom the praise is commonly, but unjustly, given of having been the first who wrote rhymed heroic verse with elegance and correctness, may certainly lay claim to a lady's notice, since to her sex he devoted some of his choicest strains. I am apprehensive, however, that his gallantries may seem to you somewhat far-fetched, and his compliments over-strained, and that, for your own part, you would prefer tenderness to deification. Love, in its highest tone, is, indeed, favourable to poetry; which scorns the limits of

truth

truth and nature, and in every thing affects hyperbole. But in such cases, the fancy is gratified at the expense of the feeling, and fiction occupies the place of reality.

There are three topics which poets (and often the same poets) treat in a similar manner; devotion, love, and loyalty: or rather, they apply to the two latter, expressions and sentiments borrowed from the former. Thus Waller, speaking of his Saccharissa;

Scarce can I to Heaven excuse
The devotion which I use
Unto that adored dame,
For 'tis not unlike the same
Which I thither ought to send.

In the piece containing these lines, he has made an ingenious parallel between his high-flown passion for this lady, and that which at the same time he felt for one whom he calls Amoret; and you may make it an exercise of the heart, as well as of the taste, to consider whether you would have chosen to be the poet's Saccharissa or his Amoret.

Amoret. I am inclined to think that the latter had the best chance of being long and truly loved. We know, from Waller's history, that he did not obtain his Saccharissa, and yet he does not appear to have been a sufferer from amorous disappointment. It is, however, but an idle task to compare a poet's life with his verses; and the grave critics who have spent much pains on such disquisitions with respect to many eminent votaries of the Muses, have only proved how little they entered into the character and feelings of this capricious set of mortals.

In Waller, the affection of loyalty was not less mutable than that of love, and he equally made it the servant of present dominion, in whatever hands. His "Panegyric of Cromwell" is thought to be the composition in which his muse has taken the loftiest flight. The cause of its superiority to others of his adulatory strains was probably the reverse of that which he ingeniously suggested by way of apology to

Charles II.—"that poets succeed better in fiction than in truth:" it was, that in Cromwell he had a really great though a bad man to celebrate; with whom the indolent and inglorious Charles could stand in no degree of competition. From this piece you may take the measure of his powers in the heroic style. You will find them not inconsiderable, though wanting the support of correct taste and uniform elevation of thought. I imagine, however, that you will receive more pleasure from some of his lighter effusions, in which his fancy sports with ease and grace. The application of the story of Phœbus and Daphne to a poet who obtained the laurel, while he missed the object of his amorous pursuit, was greatly admired in its day, and may, even in this correcter age, be allowed the praise of ingenuity, though its concluding point is but a kind of play on words. I shall not particularize other pieces, but leave you the agreeable employment of culling from his poetic garden those which best please you.

There

There are weeds in it, but, I think, no poisonous or offensive plants.

I shall next desire you to take down the works of PRIOR, a poet whose fame is indeed somewhat obscured by time, but who has just claims to a reader's attention. You will find his versification generally melodious, and well varied in its pauses; his diction elegant and animated, and his ideas copious and poetical. He is apt to run into prolixity, and the subjects of many of his serious pieces are such as would afford you little entertainment; for what is less interesting than the incense bestowed upon royal and titled personages, after they have ceased to be the living objects of a respect which, perhaps, always belonged more to their stations than to themselves? When these temporary pieces, and others which I cannot with propriety recommend to your perusal, are abstracted, Prior's works will shrink to a small compass.

His "Henry and Emma" is too celebrated among amatory compositions not to de-

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mand your notice. The story belongs to an older writer, but has been so much adorned and amplified by Prior, that it may almost pass for an original production. He has, however, spun it rather too fine, and has assigned to it a refinement of manners and sentiment which destroys all the *costume* of the age in which the scene is laid. Yet if you can overcome the distaste you will naturally feel for the hard and unfair trials to which Emma is subjected, and her too fond compliance with unreasonable requisitions, you will not fail to derive pleasure from the beauty of the poetry.

The poem of "Solomon" is the author's principal work of the serious kind, and it is certainly no ordinary performance. You will not read it as a guide either in natural or moral philosophy, for in these points it has many defects; nor is the general inference, "all is vanity," a maxim which it is practically useful to inculcate. Though a voluptuous monarch missed his way in the

pursuit of happiness, it does not follow that private virtue and wisdom may not attain such a share of it as is permitted to man in his present imperfect condition: at least, all things are not *equally* vain, and reason has sufficient scope for exercising a choice. But comfortless as the doctrine of human misery appears, it has always been a favourite topic with rhetoricians and poets, who seem to have found in it a source of that sublime which consists in dark and awful ideas. Prior has dwelt upon it with unusual energy, and the following moral climax upon the subject is truly poetical:

Happy the mortal man, who now at last
Has thro' this doleful vale of misery past;
Who to his destin'd stage has carried on
The tedious load, and laid his burthen down;
Whom the cut brass, or wounded marble, shows
Victor o'er life and all her train of woes!
He, happier yet, who privileg'd by fate
To shorter labour, and a lighter weight,
Receiv'd but yesterday the gift of breath,
Order'd tomorrow to return to death.
But O! beyond description happiest he,
Who ne'er must roll on life's tumultuous sea;

Who

Who, with blest freedom, from the general doom
Exempt, must never force the teeming womb,
Nor see the sun, nor sink into the tomb!

To give any sense to this latter clause, the notion of a pre-existent state must be admitted, which has met with several grave assertors, though apparently little conformable to reason or revelation.

The most pleasing part of the poem of "Solomon," is that in which the loves of the Jewish king with the Egyptian maid, and with Abra, are described. The contrast between the two females is finely drawn; and the empire gradually established over the royal lover by the gentle and complying Abra is an instructive piece of moral painting.

It is possible that this poem may tire you before you have got through the three books: yet the matter is well varied, and the narration is skilfully broken by sentiment and reflection. But it is Prior's fault that he cannot resist an occasion to amplify; and he often indulges in a trite ser-

monizing

monizing strain, which all the splendour of his language does not prevent from becoming tedious. You will observe here and there in his verse a quick succession of triplets, which have an unpleasant effect on the ear by breaking the regularity of the measure, and seem merely a luxuriance of the faulty redundance of his style.

I shall not set you to read any of his prolix compositions called Odes, in which he celebrates William and Anne, or laments for Mary. Neither the subjects, nor his manner of treating them, would probably interest you.

But I wish it were easy for me to direct your eye to the best of his smaller pieces, which are unfortunately interspersed among so much inferior and so much improper matter, that many pages must be turned over to get at them. I will, however, point out a few, which you may find by the help of the table of contents.

Prior has given us some of the best specimens of those short amatory poems in stan-

zas, or returning measures, which are usually called *songs*, though, perhaps, they may never be set to music. It is remarkable, that in twenty-eight actual songs, set by the most eminent masters, he has scarcely given one worth reading. But some really good ones are interspersed in his works, which may serve to give you a taste of this pleasing species of composition. The piece beginning "The merchant to secure his treasure" ingeniously compares the different appearances of real and of pretended love. "If wine and music have the power," is a poetical ode upon the Horatian model. Pathetic tenderness characterizes the two short pieces of which the first lines are "Yes, fairest proof of beauty's power," and "In vain you tell your parting lover." That entitled "Phillis's Age" is an example of the witty and satirical manner. The "Despairing Shepherd" beautifully paints that pure and exalted passion which is the soul of romance. When love of this kind was in credit, "He bow'd, obey'd, and died" must have been the

the very perfection of amorous allegiance. In "The Garland" a touching moral is deduced with great elegance from a circumstance well adapted to poetical description. The "Lady's Looking-glass" may rank with this in subject, though not written in stanzas. "The female Phaeton" is a piece of great sprightliness, wrought to an epigrammatic point, founded, like Waller's Phœbus and Daphne, upon a classical allusion. The extravagance of "set the world on fire" would be admired at a time when men of wit and gallantry thought they could not go too far in complimenting a lady. Among the pieces called *ballads*, by which were meant a species of narrative songs in a familiar and humorous style, you will be amused with "Down-Hall," and "The Thief and Cordelier."

It is mortifying that the talent for which Prior is particularly famous, that of telling a story with ease and pleasantry, should have been exercised upon such topics as absolutely to preclude a young lady from

enjoying

enjoying it. I can only venture to give you a taste of his manner by "the English Padlock," which is written with his characteristic vivacity, and contains a very good moral.

You cannot at present be prepared to relish his comico-philosophical poem of "Alma;" and I think we have already dwelt long enough upon the works of an author, whose beauties are of a kind not the most favourable to the formation of a correct taste.

Adieu!

LETTER V.

We will next, my dear Mary, turn to an author, one of whose praises it is, never to have written "a line which, dying, he would wish to blot"—the moral and elegant ADDISON. He ranks, indeed, much higher as a writer of prose than of verse, yet he first came into notice for his talents in the latter capacity. He had the fortune to live at a time when the union of poetry with loyalty bore a high value, and his praises of William and Marlborough were rewarded with pensions and public employments. The subjects of these pieces probably will not much recommend them to you; yet the second, entitled "The Campaign," retains considerable celebrity among poems of its class. It is composed with care, and supports an uniform and polished dignity: several of its passages

even

even rise to a degree of sublimity. The simile of the destroying angel, to whom Marlborough at the battle of Blenheim is compared, has been much admired:

> So when an angel by divine command
> With rising tempests shakes a guilty land,
> Such as of late o'er pale Britannia past,
> Calm and serene he drives the furious blast:
> And pleas'd th' Almighty's orders to perform,
> Rides in the whirlwind, and directs the storm.

An objection has been made against this simile, that it too nearly resembles the primary object; for the Angel and Marlborough are both represented as performing a task of destruction under the command of a superior, and both are rational beings exerting similar mental qualities. But if this circumstance be a deduction from the ingenuity of the thought, it is none from its grandeur, or from the value of the parallel as enhancing the idea of the poet's hero. No greater conception of a chief in battle can be formed, than that of a superior being, in tranquil security, directing

the furious movements of a resistless force, and intent only upon executing the commission with which he is charged.

The "Letter from Italy" has long held a distinguished place among descriptive poems. It possesses the advantage of local topics well adapted to poetry; for nature and art seem to contend in decorating the happy region which is its subject: there is little, however, of the enthusiasm of genius in Addison's sketches, and his pencil seems rather guided by cool reflection than ardent emotion. The praise of liberty is the theme on which he is most animated, yet his encomiums on it are vague and uncharacteristic. The "goddess heav'nly bright, Profuse of bliss and pregnant with delight," has no attributes to distinguish her from any other beneficent deity.

Of his miscellaneous pieces, none is so worthy of attention as that addressed "to Kneller on his Picture of the King." The parallel between the heathen gods and a

series of the English kings is singularly ingenious and happy.

His "Hymns" have deservedly obtained a distinguished place in collections of sacred poesy. With sufficient polish and elevation, they preserve that simplicity of language which is requisite for the clear expression of sentiment, and which appears more favourable to devotion than the lofty obscurity of metaphorical diction.

A great portion of Addison's verse consists of translation from the Latin poets. These do not rise beyond a kind of elegant mediocrity, and are of little value in themselves. It may, however, be worth your while to read those from Ovid, as amusing tales, which will initiate you in those antient fictions to which so many allusions are made by modern poets. The story of Phaëton is one of the most splendid of these, and perhaps the most poetical production of its author; nor has the translator

lator been wanting in diligence to render it agreeable to the English reader.

It would be unjust to the relative merit of Addison not to remark, that the force of his poetical powers is principally displayed in his tragedy of "Cato," a performance to which the plan of my present letters does not extend, but which will undoubtedly at some period come within the compass of your reading. With respect to his opera of "Rosamond," it is a tuneful trifle which you may turn over whenever you find it engage your curiosity. It will supply you with some new specimens of singularly melodious versification.

PARNELL is a poet who may be put into your hands with a certainty of affording you pleasure; nor is there any need of selection in his works, as far as those contained in Pope's edition, which terminates with the "Hermit." These, however, do not constitute a third part of the matter in the modern editions of Parnell's poems. Of these copious appendages Dr. Johnson

says,

says, "I know not whence they came, nor have ever inquired whither they are going;" and if, in an express criticism on the author, he thought himself justified in treating them with so much indifference, I may surely take the same liberty, when it is my sole object to point out such pieces as may most agreeably impress you with his characteristic excellencies. These are, uncommon sweetness and clearness of language, melodious versification, lively elegance of sentiment, and force of description.

The first piece in the volume, entitled "Hesiod, or the Rise of Woman," is a sprightly and ingenious fable, of which he is indebted to the old Grecian bard only for the bare outline. It is somewhat saucy with respect to your sex; yet I think you will excuse the following list of the talents conferred by Venus on the first woman, on account of the beauty with which they are enumerated.

Then

Then in a kiss she breath'd her various arts
Of trifling prettily with wounded hearts;
A mind for love, but still a changing mind;
The lisp affected, and the glance design'd;
The sweet confusing blush, the secret wink;
The gentle-swimming walk, the courteous sink;
The stare for strangeness fit, for scorn the frown;
For decent yielding, looks declining down;
The practis'd languish, where well-feign'd desire
Would own its melting in a mutual fire;
Gay smiles to comfort; April showers to move;
And all the nature, all the art, of love.

The "Fairy Tale" is a very pleasant sport of the fancy employed to produce an interesting moral. I know nothing of the kind in English poetry that equals it.

Much imagination is displayed in the "Allegory on Man," particularly in the picture of *Young Time*, a new personage in poetry. The doom pronounced upon Man, of having Care assigned him through life for an inseparable companion, has too serious a truth for its foundation!

In the "Night-piece on Death," the meditation among the tombs is finely introduced with a solemn and majestic land-

scape, which gives a suitable preparatory impression to the mind. The sudden change of scene at—

> Ha! while I gaze pale Cynthia fades,
> The bursting earth unveils the shades!

is one of the most striking incidents to be met with in descriptive poetry.

But the most popular production of this poet is "The Hermit," a tale, in the embellishment of which, he has manifestly exerted his highest powers. The story itself, intended to elucidate the doctrine of a particular providence, is of antient invention, and Parnell has only the merit of telling it in a poetical manner. In his narration he has preserved a due medium between dry conciseness and prolixity; and though his diction is cultured, it is not overloaded with ornament.

Of the smaller pieces in the volume, the songs, odes, eclogues, &c., the general character is sprightliness and elegance. The translation of the "Battle of the Frogs

and Mice, commonly attributed to Homer," is well executed; but it has been justly remarked that the humorous effect of the proper names, which are all significative in the Greek, is lost to the English reader.

Swift, in one of his familiar poems, says,

> —Have you nothing new to-day
> From Pope, from Parnell, or from Gay?

All these authors were his friends, and entertained the public at the same time: but though he has mentioned them together, he certainly did not estimate them all at the same rate. Pope's superiority could not be a subject of question. The other two, though considerably different in their merits, might bear a comparison with each other in point of genius. Gay, however, as the more copious and various writer, makes a greater figure than Parnell in the gallery of English poets, and has acquired a degree of reputation which renders his name familiar to all readers of poetry.

Gay is an original author, who drew his images and sentiments from the store of his own observation. He has no claim to sublimity, and has little of the warmth and enthusiasm which denote a poet of the higher order; but he is easy and natural, sometimes elegant, often pleasant, generally amusing, and never tiresome. His works are extremely varied in subject and manner, and require selection both in respect to merit and propriety. I shall, as in other cases, content myself with pointing out such as will afford you a competent view of his poetical character, and at the same time furnish you with suitable entertainment.

If his first essay in verse, the "Rural Sports," be compared with Pope's juvenile Windsor Forest, the difference will appear strongly marked between one, who, with only ordinary powers of language and versification, describes what he has himself observed; and one, who, skilled in all the mechanism of poetry, gives a splendid

colouring to objects borrowed from the stock of written description. Country sports, indeed, have frequently been the theme of poets, but Gay introduces many incidents which are exclusively his own.

Originality is, however, much more strongly stamped upon his next poem, "Trivia, or The Art of walking the Streets in London," in the plan and execution of which he has undoubtedly the claim of an inventor. The piece is an example of what may be termed the grave-comic, or burlesque-heroic, in which, ludicrous or vulgar subjects are treated in a style of mock-elevation. Its matter is professedly *didactic* or preceptive; and it is indeed so seriously instructive in the art it proposes to teach, that were not the art itself of a low kind, and attended with comic circumstances, it would lose the character of burlesque. A young lady cannot fully enter into the humour of this production, for it is not to be supposed that she has been an unprotected

tected pedestrian at all hours in the streets of the metropolis; yet many of the incidents may be easily conceived, and are extremely amusing. The stop in the street at the pass of St. Clement's is described in a manner which will excite the shuddering recollection of every practised walker. If you have ever seen a fire, you will recognize the accuracy and force with which it is painted:

At first a glowing red enwraps the skies,
And borne by winds the scatt'ring sparks arise;
From beam to beam the fierce contagion spreads;
The spiry flames now lift aloft their heads;
Thro' the burst sash a blazing deluge pours,
And splitting tiles descend in rattling showers, &c.

The origin of the Patten is a pretty mythological fiction. That which relates the birth of the shoe-blacking art, was probably derived from one of those hints which the poet acknowledges to have received from his friend Swift, and too much partakes of the uncleanliness of his imagination.

nation. On the whole, while I confess "Trivia" to be a favourite of mine, I scarcely expect that it will become yours.

Gay doubtless rather aimed at pleasing his fair friends by his poem of "The Fan," in which he has exerted all the elegance and delicacy of his invention. This piece also comes under the head of burlesque poetry, on account of the disproportion between its subject, and the weight of *machinery* it employs. By this term is understood that agency of supernatural powers, which, whilst it aggrandises the lofty topics of the epic muse, serves, by way of contrast, to enhance the humour of light and ludicrous compositions. As an acquired taste is requisite for entering into the spirit of such fictions, I know not whether you are yet prepared to relish the mock-solemnity of a council of the Gods debating upon the decorations of a fan; but a classical critic will tell you that there is much beauty of adaptation in the subjects proposed by different deities for

paintings

paintings on the mount; and you will be sensible of the elegance of description in various parts of the detail.

Your attention is next called to "The Shepherd's Week," a set of Pastorals; but some information concerning the occasion of their composition will usefully precede the perusal. I have already observed to you, that Pope's Pastorals have little other merit than the melody of their versification and splendour of their diction, and that they paint neither the scenery nor the manners of the country. They were received, however, with an applause, which seems to have excited the envy of Ambrose Philips, a cotemporary poet, who attempted to correct the public taste by a specimen of pastoral poetry written upon a plan which he conceived more suitable to this species of composition. His pastorals were, therefore, in their language and incidents, of a much more simple and rustic cast; in which they certainly made a nearer approach to the original Greek models,

and gave a more natural representation of rural life. This simplicity, however, in some instances was capable of being set in a ludicrous point of view; and Pope excited a laugh against them by an ironical paper in the "Guardian."

Gay entered the field as an auxiliary to Pope; and by way of exaggerating the ridicule thrown upon vulgar pastoral, undertook to write a set of pieces in which the real manners of country clowns should be painted, without any fictitious softening. But the result was probably very different from what either he or his friends expected; for these burlesque pastorals became the most popular compositions of that class in the language. The ridicule in them is, indeed, sufficiently obvious to a cultivated reader; but such is the charm of reality, and so grateful to the general feelings are the images drawn from rural scenes, that they afforded amusement to all ranks of readers; and they who did not comprehend the jest, enjoyed them as faith-

 ful

ful copies of nature. Gay, as I have already remarked, was a curious observer; and whether in the streets of London, or in a Devonshire village, he noted down every thing that came in his view. Whatever he thus had stored in his memory, he brought forth in his compositions in the same mixed groups that nature herself presents, where the elegant and the vulgar, the serious and the comic, march side by side. Thus, in the Pastorals before us, while he pursues his primary design of burlesque parody, he paints rural scenes with a truth of pencil scarcely elsewhere to be met with; and even pathetic circumstances are intermixed with strokes of sportive humour. The death of Blouzelind, in the fifth pastoral, with some omissions would make a scene more touching, because more natural, than most of the lamentable tales of our modern sentimentalists. This singular combination distinguishes several of Gay's productions, especially his dramas.

I shall not recommend to you his epistles, eclogues,

eclogues, tales, and other miscellaneous pieces. There is entertainment in them, but they want more selection than it is worth your while to bestow. But you will not neglect his two celebrated ballads of "All in the Downs," and "'Twas when the seas were roaring," which have been sung and repeated by the grandmothers of the present generation. He has some other pleasing pieces of the song kind; and his "Molly Mog" and "Song of Similies" are familiar in humorous poetry.

Of all Gay's works, none, however, is so well known as his "Fables," many of which have probably already come in your way as part of the juvenile library. Fable, as a poetical composition, requires an union of various excellencies in order to render it perfect. It should be ingenious in its construction, and not merely the illustration of some common moral, by attributing to brutes the actions and sentiments of men. Its descriptions should be exactly copied from nature, and include as much

as possible of the natural history of the animals who are made the persons of the drama. Its style of narration should be easy and sprightly, but not coarsely familiar. In the first of these qualities Gay has little claim to merit; for very few of his fables display ingenuity of invention or refinement of moral. The "Jugglers" and the "Court of Death" perhaps stand the highest in this respect. His talent for minute observation makes him often happy in description; and though his animals act like mere men, they are generally introduced with appropriate portraiture and scenery. His language is for the most part sufficiently easy without being vulgar; but it is destitute of those strokes of shrewd simplicity which so much charm in La Fontaine. As to the scope of his Fables, it is almost entirely satirical; and you will probably be surprised to find, upon consideration, how little suited many of them are to the avowed design of instructing a young prince. But moral judg-

ment was by no means the forte of this writer.

This epistle has run out to an unreasonable length, so I hasten to conclude it with an affectionate adieu.

Yours, &c.

LETTER VI.

I NOW, my dear Mary, mean to treat you with a rarity—a writer *perfect* in his kind. It may be a doubt whether perfection in an inferior branch of art indicates higher talents than something short of perfection in a superior; but it cannot be questioned that, by way of a study, and for the cultivation of a correct taste, a perfect work in any department is a most valuable object.

Dean SWIFT is in our language the master in *familiar poetry*. Without the perusal of his works no adequate conception can be formed of wit and humour moving under the shackles of measure and rhyme with as much ease as if totally unfettered; and even borrowing grace and vigour from the constraint. In your progress hitherto, although it has been through some of our

most

most eminent poets, you cannot but have observed, that the necessity of finding a termination to a line of the same sound with that of the preceding, has frequently occasioned the employment of an improper word, such as without this necessity would never have suggested itself in that connexion. Indeed, it is not uncommon in ordinary versifiers to find a whole line thrown in for no other purpose than to introduce a rhyming word. How far rhyme is a requisite decoration of English verse, you will judge from your own perceptions, after perusing the best specimens of blank verse. It is manifest, however, that when employed, its value must be in proportion to its exactness, and to its coincidence with the sense. In these respects, Swift is without exception the most perfect rhymer in the language; and you will admire how the very word which by its meaning seems most fit for the occasion, slides in without effort as the echo in sound to the terminating word of the preceding line. Even dou-

ble and triple rhymes are ready at his call, and, though suggesting the most heterogeneous ideas, are happily coupled by some of those whimsical combinations in which comic wit consists.

The diction of Swift is the most complete example of colloquial ease that verse affords. In aiming at this manner, other writers are apt to run into quaintness and oddity; but in Swift not a word or phrase occurs which does not belong to the natural style of free conversation. It is true, this freedom is often indecorous, and would at the present day be scarcely hazarded by any one who kept good company, still less by a clergyman. Yet he has known how to make distinctions; and while many of his satirical and humorous pieces are grossly tainted with indelicacies, some of his best and longest compositions are void of any thing that can justly offend. It is evident, indeed, that Swift, though destitute of genius for the sublimer parts of poetry, was sufficiently capable of elegance,

had

had he not preferred indulging his vein for sarcastic wit. No one could compliment more delicately when he chose it, as no one was a better judge of proprieties of behaviour, and the graces of the female character.

From the preceding representation, you will conclude that I cannot set you to read Swift's works straight forwards. In fact, your way through them must be picked very nicely, and a large portion of them must be left unvisited. It should be observed, however, to do him justice, that their impurities are not of the moral kind, but are chiefly such as it is the scavenger's office to remove.

The first of his poems which I shall point out to your notice is the longest and one of the most serious of his compositions. Its title, "Cadenus and Vanessa," denotes his own concern in the subject; for *Cadenus* is Decanus (the Dean) transposed; and *Vanessa* is the poetical name of miss Vanhomrigh, a young lady whose unfortunate

love for him met with a cold return. This piece, under an ingenious mythological fiction, contains a fine compliment to the lady, and much severe satire on the greater part of her sex, as well as on the foppish part of ours. You must, indeed, in reading Swift, arm yourself with patience to endure the most contemptuous treatment of your sex; for which, if really justified by the low state of mental cultivation among the females of that period, you may console yourself by the advantageous comparison afforded by that of the present age. The poem does not finish the real story; for it says,

> ———what success Vanessa met
> Is to the world a secret yet.

The melancholy truth was, that after uniting himself secretly with another woman, he continued to visit Vanessa, and she retained her hopes of softening his obduracy, till a final explanation broke her heart. This poem was in her possession, and

and by her direction was published after her death.

The "Poems to Stella" will naturally follow. This was the lady to whom the former was sacrificed; but she seems to have had little enjoyment in the preference. His pride, or his singularity, made him refuse his consent to the publication of their marriage, and they continued to live apart as mere friends. Yet he appears to have sincerely loved her, probably beyond any other human being; and almost the only sentiments of tenderness in his writings are to be found in the poems addressed to her. This affection, however, does not in general characterize them, and the writer's disposition to raillery breaks out in the midst of his most complimentary strains. A Frenchman would be shocked at his frequent allusions to her advancing years. His exposure of her defects, too, may seem much too free for a lover, or even a husband; and it is easy to conceive that Stella's temper was fully tried in the connection.

Yet

Yet a woman might be proud of the serious approbation of such a man, which he expresses in language evidently coming from the heart. They are, indeed,

> Without one word of Cupid's darts,
> Of killing eyes and bleeding hearts;

but they contain topics of praise which far outlive the short season of youth and beauty. How much superior to frivolous gallantry is the applause testified in lines like these!

> Say, Stella, feel you no content
> Reflecting on a life well spent?
> Your skilful hand employ'd to save
> Despairing wretches from the grave,
> And then supporting with your store
> Those whom you dragg'd from death before?
> Your generous boldness to defend
> An innocent and absent friend;
> That courage which can make you just
> To merit humbled in the dust;
> The detestation you express
> For vice in all its glittering dress;
> That patience under tort'ring pain
> Where stubborn stoics would complain?

In the lines "To Stella visiting him in sickness," there is a picture of *honour*, as influencing the female mind, which is morally sublime, and deserves attentive study:

> Ten thousand oaths upon record
> Are not so sacred as her word;
> The world shall in its atoms end
> Ere Stella can deceive a friend; &c.

There is something truly touching in the description of Stella's ministring in the sick chamber, where

> ——with a soft and silent tread
> Unheard she moves about the bed.

In all these pieces there is an originality which proves how much the author's genius was removed from any thing trite and vulgar: indeed, his life, character and writings were all singularly his own, and distinguished from those of other men.

May I now, without offence, direct you by way of contrast to the "Journal of a Modern Lady?" It is, indeed, an outrageous satire on your sex, but one perfectly harmless

harmless with respect to yourself or any whom you love. I point it out as an admirable example of the author's familiar and colloquial manner. It also exhibits a specimen of his powers in that branch of poetical invention which is regarded as one of the higher efforts of the art. A more animated group of *personifications* is not easily to be met with than the following lines exhibit:

When, frighted at the clamorous crew,
Away the God of Silence flew,
And fair Discretion left the place,
And Modesty, with blushing face.
Now enters overweening Pride,
And Scandal ever gaping wide,
Hypocrisy with frown severe,
Scurrility with gibing air,
Rude Laughter, seeming like to burst,
And Malice, always judging worst,
And Vanity with pocket-glass,
And Impudence with front of brass,
And study'd Affectation came,
Each limb and feature out of frame,
While Ignorance, with brain of lead,
Flew hov'ring o'er each female head.

The

The poems of Swift are printed in a different order in different editions; I shall therefore attend to no particular order in mentioning them to you. As I have commended the last for the easy familiarity of its style, I shall next refer to one which perhaps stands the first in this respect; and in which, not only the language of the speakers, but their turn of thinking, is imitated with wonderful exactness. This is, "The Grand Question debated, whether Hamilton's Bawn should be turned into a Barrack or a Malt-house." The measure is that which is classically called anapæstic, chiefly consisting of feet or portions composed of two short and one long syllable. Next to that of eight syllables, it is the most used for light and humorous topics; and no kind of English verse runs so glibly, or gives so much the air of conversation. The satire of the piece is chiefly directed against the gentlemen of the army, for whom Swift, probably through party prepossessions, seems always to have entertained

tertained both aversion and contempt. It is, however, irresistibly pleasant.

Another conversation piece which rivals the last in ease, though not in humour, is "Mrs. Harris's Petition." The singularity of it is the long loose measure in which it is written, and which indeed is scarcely to be called verse, though divided into lines terminated with rhyme. Swift was fond of oddities of all kinds, some of which sink into mere puerilities. The number of these, raked together by injudicious editors, would have injured his reputation, had it not been solidly founded upon pieces of real excellence.

The story of "Baucis and Philemon," imitated from Ovid, is one of the happiest examples of that kind of humour which consists in modernising an antient subject in the way of parody. It will be worth your while first to read a translation of the original tale, which you will find in Dryden's Fables. The dexterity with which Swift has altered it to his purpose, cannot

fail

fail to strike you upon the comparison. The particulars of the transformation are fancied with all the circumstantial propriety for which this author is famous, and are described with great pleasantry. The *parsonifying* of Philemon gives occasion to some sarcastic strokes against his own profession, in which he frequently indulged, though he could not readily bear them from others.

His imitations from Horace, those, especially, which begin "Harley the nation's great support," and "I've often wish'd that I had clear," are equally excellent. They do not, like the former, borrow a subject from antiquity, but follow allusively the train of thought and incident presented by the original. You must, I fear, be content to lose the pleasure derived from this allusive resemblance; but you cannot fail of being entertained by the ease and humour with which he tells his story. In these qualities he is certainly unrivalled; and the pieces in question would afford an useful study to one who should

 investigate

investigate the means by which this air of facility is obtained. The colloquial touches in the following lines are admirable in this view:

> 'Tis (let me see) three years and more,
> (October next it will be four.)—
>
> My lord—the honour you design'd—
> Extremely proud—but I had din'd.—

Though many more entertaining *pickings* may be made from this author, and even some pieces of considerable length might be safely recommended to your perusal, (as, for example, the "Rhapsody on Poetry," and the "Beast's Confession,") yet I shall bring my remarks to a conclusion, with the "Verses on his own Death," a piece written in the maturity of his powers, and upon which he evidently bestowed peculiar attention. Its foundation is a maxim too well suited to Swift's misanthropical disposition; and he must be allowed to have illustrated it with much knowledge of mankind, as well as with a large portion of his characteristic humour.

Yet

Yet it may be alleged, that his temper was too little calculated to inspire a tender affection in his friends, to render the manner in which his death would be received, an example for all similar cases. Still it is, perhaps, generally true, that in the calamities of others,

> Indifference clad in wisdom's guise
> All fortitude of mind supplies;

and that the ordinary language of lamentation at the decease of one not intimately connected with us, and whose life was not greatly important to our happiness, is little more than, as he has represented it, the customary cant of feeling. We must likewise assent to the remark on the force that selfishness gives to sympathy, which he has so finely expressed in the following lines:

> Yet should some neighbour feel a pain
> Just in the parts where I complain,
> How many a message he would send!
> What hearty prayers that I should mend!

Inquire

Inquire what regimen I kept,
What gave me ease, and how I slept;
And more lament when I was dead
Than all the snivellers round my bed.

The lamentations of his female friends over their cards will amuse you, as one of his happiest conversation-pieces. The greater part of the poem is devoted to the justification of his character and conduct; and, unless you have acquainted yourself with his life, will not greatly interest you. Indeed, I recollect reading it with greater pleasure in the earlier editions, when there was less detail of this kind.

So much may suffice for an author who, upon the whole, is regarded rather as a man of wit than as a poet. Though inimitable in one style of writing, his excellence is limited to that style. His works are extremely amusing, but the pleasure we take in them is abated by a vein of malignity which is too apparent even when he is most sportive.

Farewell!

LETTER VII.

MY DEAR MARY,

You doubtless bear in mind, perhaps with some little chagrin, that I tore you, as it were, from the perusal of one of our most charming poets, precisely at the time when it was becoming peculiarly interesting to you. I then gave you the reason for such an exercise of discipline; and I am persuaded you now feel the benefit of having been introduced to various modes of poetic excellence, before your taste was too firmly fixed upon one.

I should probably take you a still wider excursion before returning to the volumes of Pope, did I not wish to engage you in the study (do not be alarmed at the word!) of one of his great performances, for the purpose of enlarging your acquaintance with *poetic history*; that is, with the personages,

sonages, human and divine, and the incidents, which are so frequently alluded to in modern as well as in antient poetry. I refer to his translation of Homer's "Iliad," a work of remote antiquity, which stands at the head of epic poetry, and has a greater share of fame accumulated around it than perhaps any other literary composition. The Trojan war, its heroes and its gods, are a common fund upon which all poets draw at pleasure. They furnish an inexhaustible store for simile, allusion, parody, and other poetical uses; and every writer takes it for granted that all the circumstances belonging to them are perfectly familiar to his reader. Moreover, the whole frame of *the epic*, as a species of composition, is modelled upon the Iliad of Homer, and its companion the Odyssey; whence the perusal of one or both of these pieces ought to precede that of all later productions of the same class.

Pope's translations of Homer have always been esteemed as first-rate perform-

ances

ances of the kind; and indeed, no poetical versions surpass them in beauty of versification and elegance and splendour of diction. They are faithful, too, as far as to the substance of the originals; they neither omit nor add circumstances of narrative or similes, and they adhere to the general sense of the Greek in speeches and sentiments. But with respect to the dress and colouring, it must be confessed that Pope and Homer differ in all the points that discriminate the writers of an age of refinement from those of an age of simplicity. The antient bard, though lofty in his diction where the subject is elevated, relates common things in plain language, is sometimes coarse and frequently dry, and has many passages which exhibit nothing of the poet but a sonorous versification. The translator, on the other hand, never forgets that he is to support the dignity of modern heroics: and though he has too much judgment to scatter ornament with a lavish hand; yet, to soften what is harsh,

to raise what is low, to enrich what is poor, and to animate what is insipid, are accommodations to a cultivated taste which he does not scruple to employ.

The *manner* of Homer is therefore lost in Pope's representation of him; and one whose object is to know how a poet wrote three thousand years ago, must have recourse to some version formed upon different principles: of this kind a very good one has been given by the late excellent and lamented Cowper. But as an English poem, Pope's is certainly an admirable work; and you will derive from it all the instruction on account of which I am now principally recommending it, while at the same time you are improving your relish for the beauties of verse.

The Odyssey, though less poetical in the original than the Iliad, and less indebted to the care of the translator, who employed two inferior hands to assist him in his labour, is not less worthy of your attention, on account of the more minute

views

views it gives of the manners of antiquity, and the popular fables which it contains. Some parts of it, likewise, especially those including moral sentiment, are rendered with exquisite skill and beauty.

If the task which I have enjoined you should prove tiresome before it is finished, you may interpose between the two translations the perusal of the remaining original works of the same poet; such, I mean, as I can properly recommend to a lady's view.

Whether the "Epistle of Eloisa to Abelard" be among this number, is a point which I feel a difficulty in determining; yet its celebrity will scarcely suffer it to be passed over in silence. They who are afraid of the inflammatory effect of high colouring applied to the tender passion, will object to a performance which, as the most exquisitely finished of all the author's productions, is, from its subject, rendered the more dangerous on that account. And true it is, that if the picture

of violent desires, unchecked by virtue and decorum, is to be regarded as too seductive, notwithstanding any annexed representation of the sufferings to which they give rise, not only this poem, but much of the real history of human life, should be concealed from the youthful sight. But surely such a distrust of good sense and principle is unworthy of an age which encourages a liberal plan of mental cultivation. To be consistent, it ought to bring back that state of ignorance, which was formerly reckoned the best guard of innocence. The piece in question, it must be confessed, is faulty in giving too forcible an expression to sentiments inconsistent with female purity; but its leading purpose is to paint the struggles of one, who, after the indulgence of a guilty passion, flew to a penitential retreat without a due preparation for the change; of a

> ....wretch believ'd the spouse of God in vain,
> Confess'd within the slave of love and man.

Such

Such a condition is certainly no object of emulation; and the poet has painted its miseries with no less force than the inconsiderate raptures which led to it. The impression supposed to be left by the story upon better regulated minds, is that which prompts the prayer,

O may we never love as these have lov'd!

The "Rape of the Lock," styled by the writer an heroi-comical poem, though one of his early productions, stands the first among similar compositions in our language, perhaps in any other. Besides possessing the author's characteristic elegance and brilliancy of expression in a supreme degree, it exhibits a greater share of the inventive faculty than any other of his works. The humour of a piece of this kind consists in the mock dignity by which a trifling subject is elevated into importance. When such a design is executed with judgment, all the parts should correspond; the moral therefore should be ironical,

ironical, and the praise satirical. For attaining consistency in these points, the spirit of the age and the character of the poet were well suited.

I must here let you into a secret, which, while it may justly excite your indignation, may preserve you from deception. That extravagant devotion to your sex which, perhaps, was a serious passion in the age of chivalry, came in process of time, and especially as modified by the licentiousness and levity of the French nation, to be a mere affair of compliment. The free admixture of women, which gave so much splendour and amenity to the French court, soon vitiated their manners; and even while they enjoyed the greatest influence, they ceased to be respectable. Wholly occupied with the care of rendering themselves desirable to the men, they neglected the culture of their minds and the duties of their sex. They who possessed beauty, relied upon that solely for their power of attraction; while those less favoured by

nature

nature sought a compensation in *the graces*. Although thus really debased, they did not exert a less absolute dominion over courtiers and men of pleasure as frivolous and vitiated as themselves; but in the mean time they lost the attachment of the sober and rational, and became objects of contempt to men of wit. In this state of things, the high-flown language of adoration was intermixed with sly strokes of satire; and at length, so much irony was joined with the praise, that a woman of sense would have regarded it as an insult.

Pope had been educated in the French school of literature. His earliest ambition was to be reckoned a man of wit and gallantry in the modish sense; and having naturally a cold and artificial character, he was well fitted to assume the part most conducive to the interests of his reputation. The personal disadvantages, too, under which he laboured, and which precluded his success as a real lover, accustomed him to fiction in his addresses to the sex, and probably infused a secret exasperation

tion into his feelings when they were concerned.

These observations are meant to be introductory not only to the burlesque poem before us, but to other pieces, in which the female sex is mentioned in a more serious manner.

The Rape of the Lock is particularly admired for the elegant and fanciful *machinery* introduced into it. Of the use of this part of an epic poem you will now be a better judge, in consequence of your acquaintance with Homer. You will have seen from his works, that its chief purpose is to vary and elevate the fable by the ministry of a set of beings different from man, and surpassing him in faculties. That this mixture of supernatural agency is liable to detract from the consequence of the human personages, is an obvious objection to its use in serious compositions, which, however, poets have thought to be counterbalanced by its advantages. In burlesque, the objection has no place. Pope, in his mock-heroic, has adopted a machinery de-

rived

rived from a fantastic kind of philosophy termed the Rosycrucian, but with such alterations and additions as suited his purpose. He has formed it into one of the most amusing fictions to be met with in poetry; airy, sportive, elegant, giving scope to descriptions of singular brilliancy, and admirably accommodated to his subject. The mode of action of these fairy-like beings is very happily fancied; and never were guardian spirits better adapted to their charge than his Sylphs. It is theirs

> To save the powder from too rude a gale,
> Nor let th' imprison'd essences exhale;
> To draw fresh colours from the vernal flow'rs;
> To steal from rainbows ere they drop in show'rs
> A brighter wash; to curl their waving hairs,
> Assist their blushes, and inspire their airs.

The Gnomes are much less distinctly represented; but the Cave of Spleen affords a striking specimen of the poet's talents for allegorical personification, and the figures of Ill-nature and Affectation are excellent sketches.

The

The story of the piece is a trifling incident that really happened, and, though not of an humorous nature, is well calculated to display that frivolity belonging to every thing in which the fair sex is concerned, which he assumes as the subject of his satire. A favourite figure by which he effects his purpose, is that of comic and degrading parallel; as in the following lines:

> Whether the nymph shall break Diana's law,
> Or some frail China jar receive a flaw;
> Or stain her honour, or her new brocade;
> Forget her pray'rs, or miss a masquerade;
> Or lose her heart, or necklace, at a ball;
> Or whether heav'n has doom'd that Shock must fall.

You will smile at these petty effusions of malice, which, in truth, have more of flippancy than wit; and you will not the less enjoy the exquisite polish of the style, and dazzling lustre of the imagery, in this performance, which are surpassed by nothing in the language. His parodies of Homer, a species of humour well adapted

to

to the mock-heroic, and which he has managed with singular dexterity, will particularly entertain you while you have his translations of that author fresh in your memory.

The Rape of the Lock is our poet's principal effort in that great province of his art, *creation*. It might have been supposed that his success in this attempt would have encouraged him to proceed to others of a similar kind: but the exercise of the inventive faculties is the most laborious and exhausting of mental operations; and many writers who have gained reputation by one or two productions of this class, have found the exertion too great to be continued. Pope's genius is chiefly characterized by the talent of expressing the ideas of other men, or the dictates of common good sense, with peculiar beauty and energy. Hence he is an excellent translator, a happy imitator, and a powerful instructor on moral and critical topics. A performance of the latter kind was one of the

the products of his early youth, and principally contributed to the establishment of his poetic fame. This is his "Essay on Criticism," a work abounding in valuable literary precepts, expressed generally with neatness, and often with brilliancy. In poetical merit it stands high among didactic pieces; yet it has many marks of juvenility in the thoughts, and of incorrectness in the language; and by no means deserves to be proposed as a guide in the critical art, with that authority which some have ascribed to it. It is, however, well worthy of your perusal; and you will recognize several of its maxims as having received the sanction of popular application.

Pope assumes a still more important character as a didactic poet in his celebrated "Essay on Man." The subject of this work is no less than a philosophical inquiry into the nature and end of human beings: it therefore comprehends the fundamental principles both of morals, and of natural religion. As this work is written upon a

systematic plan, it is proper that the reader should endeavour to become master of it, and trace the design of the whole, and the mutual connexion of the parts. This is a serious task, and would be apt to prove irksome to one accustomed to read for mere amusement; yet without the habit of occasionally fixing the attention upon a grave investigation, the mind will remain feeble and unsteady, incapable of any solid instruction. Writings in prose, which have information for their sole object, are, indeed, best fitted to engage attention of this kind; nor can it be affirmed that Pope's excellence lay in the clearness and consistency of his argumentative processes. It will be sufficient if you peruse with care his own view of the general design of this piece, and his sketches of the contents of each book. Warburton's elaborate commentary, were you even capable of fully comprehending it, would be more likely to mislead than to instruct you, since his intention was rather to disguise, than fairly to represent, the system

system of his author. After all, the Essay on Man is chiefly remembered for the beauty and sublimity of its detached passages, and the elevated sentiments of morality and religion which it inspires, and which stand independent of the particular system in which they are inserted. You may justly admire the energetic conciseness of expression in the reasoning and didactic parts, which verify the author's assertion, that he chose poetry as the vehicle of his thoughts, on account of the superior brevity with which he could deliver them in that form. For example, what combination of words could possibly give the sense of the following lines with more precision or in less compass:

> Most strength the *moving principle* requires;
> Active its task, it prompts, impels, inspires.
> Sedate and quiet the *comparing* lies,
> Form'd but to check, deliberate, and advise.
> *Self-love* still stronger, as its objects nigh;
> *Reason's* at distance, and in prospect lie:
> *That* sees immediate good by present sense;
> *Reason*, the future and the consequence.

It

It was such passages that Swift had in his eye, when he said with the candour of true friendship,

> When Pope can in one couplet fix
> More sense than I can do in six.

On the other hand, his illustrations and amplifications are often given with all that splendour of diction, and richness of imagery, which distinguish those works in which he shows himself the most of a poet.

From the Essay on Man, you will naturally proceed to the author's "Four Moral Essays" on the respective subjects of the Characters of Men; the Characters of Women; and the Use of Riches; the latter occupying two epistles. In these you will find much acute observation of mankind, much vivacity of remark and force of description, but not always justness and accuracy of thinking. You will also occasionally be disgusted with a certain flippancy of expression, and still more with a taint of grossness of language, which, if not a personal

sonal rather than a national defect, would afford an unfavourable distinction between our literature in Anne's and George's reigns, and that of France in the age of Louis the Fourteenth. Boileau, whom Pope imitated, and who was not less severe in censure than he, is beyond comparison more delicate in his language. There is a kind of coarseness, consisting in the use of common words, which conduces so much to the strength and vigour of style, that one would not wish to see it sacrificed to fastidious nicety; but Pope frequently goes beyond this, and betrays rather a contamination of ideas than a carelessness of phraseology. This remark, however, applies more to some subsequent productions than to those at present before us.

Of the particular epistles, you will probably read with most interest that "On the Characters of Women." It is, I believe, generally reckoned more brilliant than correct; more satirical than just. Whilst it assigns to your sex only two ruling passions,

sions, "the love of pleasure and the love of sway," it chiefly dwells, in the description of individual characters, upon that mutability and inconstancy of temper which has been usually charged upon the female mind. By thus representing the ends as unworthy, and the means as inconsistent, it conveys the severest possible sarcasm against the sex in general. Woman, it seems, is even "at best a contradiction;" and his concluding portrait of the most estimable female character he can conceive, is but an assemblage of contrary qualities "shaken all together." Yet this outrageous satire is almost redeemed by the charming picture he has drawn, (one would hope from the life,) of that perfection of *good-temper* in a woman, which is certainly the prime quality for enjoying and imparting happiness:

Oh! blest with temper, whose unclouded ray
Can make to-morrow cheerful as to-day;
She, who can love a sister's charms, or hear
Sighs for a daughter with unwounded ear;

She,

She, who ne'er answers till a husband cools,
Or, if she rules him, never shows she rules;
Charms by accepting, by submitting sways,
Yet has her humour most when she obeys.

I confess, this delightful portrait is marred by the concluding stroke, "Mistress of herself though china fall," which you may justly despise, as one of those flippant sneers which degrade this poet.

The epistles on the use and abuse of riches are very entertaining. They abound with maxims of good-sense and taste, illustrated by lively and poetical descriptions. A writer, so prone to satire in his moral works, might be expected to become a bitter satirist when professedly adopting that character. And, in fact, Pope had too much irritability of temper to be sparing in retaliation for a personal attack, and too honest an indignation against vice to treat it with lenity. Though he often affects an air of sportive humour in his strictures, yet he is habitually keen and caustic; and sometimes, especially when vindicating

vindicating himself, he exchanges pleasantry for serious warmth. He has conveyed a considerable portion of his satire under the form of imitations of Horace. Like his friend Swift, he has not shackled himself with a close parallel in imitating that writer, but has followed his general train of ideas, improving his hints, and making excursions of his own as the occasion prompted. You must be content, as in the former case, to lose the humour of allusion in those pieces, and read them like original productions.

The first of these imitations will show you how much in earnest he applied the censorial rod; and certainly the profession of a satirist was never represented with so much dignity as in the lines thus introduced:

> What? arm'd for virtue when I point the pen,
> Brand the bold front of shameless guilty men;
> Dash the proud gamester in his gilded car;
> Bare the mean heart that lurks beneath a star, &c.

 This

This passage, Dr. Warburton justly observes, is not only superior to any thing in Horace, but equal to any thing Pope himself has written. After such a lofty assumption, however, he should not have condescended to make his satire the weapon of party rancour or private resentment. There are very different degrees of merit in his imitations of Horace's satires and epistles, and they have so many references to persons and incidents of the time, that they cannot be understood without the aid of notes.

The versifying of Donne's satires was one of his least happy attempts. If you read them (which is scarcely worth your while) you will pity a genius held down by the awkward fetters which he has voluntarily assumed.

The Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot, entitled "Prologue to the Satires," and the two dialogues styled "Epilogue," are performances of great spirit, in which his personal feelings have given a keen edge to his

sarcasm.

sarcasm. In the first, his character of Addison under the name of Atticus has been universally admired for its polished severity: how far it was morally justified by the provocation he had received, I shall not here inquire. *Bishop* Atterbury, it seems, was so well satisfied with it, that he expressed to the author his hope that he would not suffer such a talent to remain unemployed. Indeed, were the pen of satire that "sacred weapon left for truth's defence," which he boasts it to have been in his hands, to wield it with skill would be as noble an employment of philanthropy as of genius. But Pope, though radically a lover of virtue, had too great an alloy of human infirmity in his character to act the part of a censor with uniform dignity and propriety. His personal and party prejudices, and his peevish irritability, continually warped him in the choice of objects for his attacks. Of this failing he has given a melancholy proof in the poem which next claims attention, the "Dunciad."

That

That so great a poet as Pope, in the full maturity of his powers, should consecrate his best efforts to immortalizing in ridicule a set of enemies whom he affected utterly to despise, and most of whom, without his notice, would soon have been consigned to oblivion, is a lamentable instance of the misapplication of genius, through want of that solid dignity of mind which philosophy alone can bestow. Although in this performance there is great beauty of versification, and much poetical description, I cannot recommend it to your perusal. Not only the scope of it is sufficient to inspire disgust, but there is so much grossness of imagery blended with its plan, that it is unfit for a female eye. How strange is it, that a writer so polished in his style, and who possessed the unusual advantage of familiar intercourse with the best company (as we are willing to suppose it to be), should have fallen into a vitiation of taste which could be expected only in the lowest class of authors! The apologists of Pope lay

lay the fault to his intimacy with Swift; and possibly the admirers of Swift would accuse Pope: it cannot be doubted, however, that in this particular, as well as in their arrogant contempt of cotemporary writers, they spoiled each other. The two latter books of the Dunciad are tolerably free from this contamination; but from their subject they are intelligible only to readers well versed in the literature of that period.

The smaller and miscellaneous poems of this writer I shall commit without remark to your judgment and discretion. There is one production, however, which is such a master-piece in its kind, that I would point it out to your particular attention. This is his "Prologue to Cato." Prologues to plays are singular compositions, of which the proper character is scarcely to be determined by the practice of writers. Those of Dryden, which were famous in their day, are generally attempts at licentious wit or petulant satire. His example

was

was imitated; and scarcely any thing grave or dignified had been offered to the public in this form, till Pope, inspired by the noble subject of Addison's tragedy, composed this piece, which not only stands at the head of all prologues, but is scarcely surpassed in vigour of expression and elevation of sentiment by any passage in his own works.

I now close my long letter; and remain,

Yours, &c.

LETTER VIII.

As one of our latest subjects was satire, I shall now, by way of comparison, direct you to another satirist of considerable note, of whom, however, we shall probably have more to say under another class. This is Dr. YOUNG, a cotemporary of Pope, and one of the poetical constellation of that period. This author has left us, under the general head of "Love of Fame, the universal Passion," seven satires, in which he illustrates by example this assumed principle of human conduct. Like all other theorists on the mind, who aim at simplicity in their explanation of the varieties of human character, he has laid more stress upon his fundamental principle than it will properly bear; and in many of the portraits which he draws, the love of fame

can

can scarcely be recognized as a leading feature. In reality, Young was a writer of much more fancy than judgment. He paints with a brilliant touch and strong colouring, but with little attention to nature; and his satires are rather exercises of wit and invention than grave exposures of human follies and vices. He, indeed, runs through the ordinary catalogue of fashionable excesses, but in such a style of whimsical exaggeration, that his examples have the air of mere creatures of the imagination. His pieces are, however, entertaining, and are marked with the stamp of original genius. Having much less egotism than those of Pope, they have a less splenetic air; and the author's aim seems to be so much more to show his wit, than to indulge his rancour, that his severest strokes give little pain.

It has been observed, that Young's satires are strings of epigrams. His sketches of characters are generally terminated by

a *point*,

a *point*, and many of his couplets might be received as proverbial maxims or sentences. Such are the following:

Men should press forward in fame's glorious chace;
Nobles look backward, and so lose the race.—

There is no woman where there's no reserve,
And 'tis on plenty your poor lovers starve.—

The man who builds and wants wherewith to pay,
Provides a home from which to run away.—

A common figure of speech with him is the *antithesis*, where two members of a sentence, apparently in opposition to each other, are connected by a subtle turn in the sense. Thus,

And *satirise* with nothing but their *praise*—

'Tis *inhumanity* to *bless* by chance.—

A shameless *woman* is the worst of *men*.—

Because she's *right*, she's ever in the *wrong*.—

With wit, or the association of distant ideas by some unexpected resemblance, he abounds. Almost every page affords in-

stances of his inventive powers in this respect; some, truly beautiful; others, odd and quaint. I shall produce one as a specimen, which you may classify as your judgment shall direct:

Like cats in airpumps, to subsist we strive
On joys too thin to keep the soul alive.

There is little of the majestic or dignified in Young's satires; not that he was incapable of sublimity, but because the view he took of men and manners generally excluded it. Yet his account in the seventh satire of the final cause of that principle, the love of fame, is introduced by some very noble lines, which Pope could scarcely have surpassed:

Shot from above, by heav'n's indulgence, came
This generous ardour, this unconquer'd flame,
To warm, to raise, to deify mankind,
Still burning brightest in the noblest mind.
By large-soul'd men, for thirst of fame renown'd,
Wise *laws* were fram'd, and sacred *arts* were found.
Desire of praise first broke the *patriot's* rest,
And made a bulwark of the *warrior's* breast.

The

The purpose of the passage, indeed, is to offer incense at the shrine of royalty; for Young bestowed adulation as largely as censure, and always with a view to his interest; in which he is disadvantageously distinguished from Pope. Two meaner lines will not easily be found than the following in his praise of queen Caroline:

> Her favour is diffused to that degree,
> Excess of goodness! it has beam'd *on me.*

These are at the close of his *second* satire on women; for his politeness did not prevent him from employing the lash with even peculiar force on the tender sex. I think, however, you will feel yourself little hurt by these attacks; for his ridicule consists in presenting a series of caricatures, drawn rather from fancy than observation; and he does not treat the whole sex with that contempt which is perpetually breaking out in the writings of Pope and Swift.

Before you, for the present, lay down this

this author, I will desire you to peruse a piece of descriptive poetry, in which he has shown himself master of a very different style. This is his "Paraphrase on Part of the Book of Job," a composition in its original the most sublime of those sacred writings which it accompanies, though, as in all other Hebrew poetry, its grandeur is allied to obscurity. Young has made little addition to the primitive imagery, but has rendered it more clear and precise, while it retains all its force and splendour. The descriptions are not always accurate, and the language sometimes borders upon extravagance; but his object was poetical effect, and this he has produced in an uncommon degree. Thus, after his highly wrought picture of the lion in his nightly ravages, he fixes and concentrates the impression of terror, by the figure of the flying shepherd, who

....shudders at the talon in the dust.

This is a stroke of real genius!

Having

Having now made you acquainted with some of the best specimens of rhymed verse, in heroic and familiar poetry; before we take a temporary leave of rhyme, I shall present it to you in a form of frequent use in English poetry, chiefly in connection with a particular class of topics. That kind of measure in which the heroic line of ten syllables is disposed in stanzas of four verses, of which the rhymes are placed alternately, is usually termed the *elegiac*. This name is given it, because it has been thought peculiarly suited to the serious and pathetic strain of elegy. Formerly, indeed, long poems of the epic or narrative kind were often composed in this measure; but although it is not deficient in majesty, the uniformity of a perpetually recurring stanza appeared tiresome and languid in a performance of considerable length. The necessity, too, of filling up the four lines either with a single sentence, or with similar and connected clauses, was found an obstacle to the rapidity of animated narration,

tion, and favoured the insertion of trifling and superfluous matter. This effect is less injurious where the subject is of the sentimental kind; yet it must be acknowledged, that even here, the expression of strong and varied emotion does not well comport with the slow and even march of the elegiac stanza, which is better adapted to the tender and the pensive than to the impassioned.

The "Love-Elegies" of HAMMOND are among the happiest of this class of compositions, both in respect to their style, and their turn of thought. The latter, indeed, is almost entirely borrowed from Tibullus, a Roman poet, the most admired of the elegiac writers in his language. A classic reader would find much to commend in the ease with which he has transfused the beauties of the original into English, and the skill he has shown in forming new compositions out of its detached and transposed passages. He has, however, undergone some heavy censure for adopting so

large a share of the rural imagery and heathen mythology of Tibullus, which, being with respect to himself purely fictitious, impairs the reality of his assumed character of a lover. And it is true, that his elegies have the air of being the elegant exercises of an academic, rather than the effusions of a heart touched with a real passion. But there is something in the simplicity of pastoral life so sweetly accordant with the tender affections, that the incongruity of times and manners is easily pardoned, and genuine feelings are excited under feigned circumstances. I am persuaded that, without criticising too deeply, you will receive true pleasure from the perusal of these pieces, especially from that in which a picture is drawn of connubial love in a country retreat, (Elegy XIII.) with circumstances only a little varied from those which might really take place in such a situation among ourselves. It is the English farmer who speaks in the following stanza:

With timely care I'll sow my little field,
And plant my orchard with its master's hand;
Nor blush to spread the hay, the hook to wield,
Or range my sheaves along the sunny land.

He appears afterwards under a more refined form, but still suitable enough to a *ferme ornée:*

What joy to wind along the cool retreat,
To stop and gaze on Delia as I go!
To mingle sweet discourse with kisses sweet,
And teach my lovely scholar all I know!

I could point out to you another "elegy of Delia" on the Tibullian model, written by one of your sex whom you love and honour; which, with equal tenderness, is more purely an English composition: but happily it has not yet the claim to be quoted among those pieces which are sanctioned by posthumous fame.

Farewell!

LETTER IX.

HITHERTO, my dear Pupil, we have viewed English verse with the accompaniment of rhyme. The device of marking the ends of lines with the recurrence of similar sounds, unknown to Greek and Latin poetry, was introduced in those periods when the Roman empire was overrun by the barbarous tribes of the North, and true taste gave way to puerility and caprice. The modern languages, in their gradual progress to refinement, retained an ornament which long use had rendered almost indispensable; and to this day, rhyme is commonly admitted in the verse of every European nation, and to some is regarded as absolutely essential. The meanness of its origin, and the difficulties to which it subjects a writer, have, however, produced various attempts for emancipating poetry from

from what was considered as a degrading imposition; and these attempts have in no country been so well supported as in England. The dramatic writers led the way in the disuse of rhyme; undoubtedly, because they found that more was gained by such an omission in approximating dialogue to common speech, than was lost in disappointing the ear of an accustomed jingle. After the public had been taught to relish the noble passages of Shakespear and his cotemporary tragedians in unrhymed verse, it required no extraordinary courage to venture upon the same liberty in other compositions, where the elevation of the matter might divert the reader's attention from a degree of negligence in the form. At length, Milton wrote his Paradise Lost in blank verse, and its reputation was established. But it is only in one kind of measure, the heroic, that the absence of rhyme has obtained general toleration. In the shorter measures, and in those diversified by lines of different lengths, and

complicated

complicated into stanzas, the practised ear has never been brought to acquiesce in the want of a gratification to which it has been accustomed. Indeed, some of these measures, as the elegiac, are entirely dependent on the rhyme.

There has been much discussion concerning the comparative merit of blank verse and rhymed couplets in the heroic measure, and it is not likely that different tastes will ever, by any process of reasoning, be brought to agree on this head. It may be useful, however, to give a brief statement of the case. I have already mentioned, that this measure is formed of ten syllables, alternately short and long, with the occasional irregularity of two long or two short successively. This produces a modulation so simple, and so little different from prose, that without some art in recitation, it is not easily distinguished to be verse. Moreover, as there is nothing to mark to the ear the tenth or terminating syllable but the rhyme; where that is omitted,

ted, *measure*, properly speaking, is entirely lost in the modern way of reading; which is directed solely by the sense, and makes no pauses but as indicated by the punctuation. If, indeed, a suspension of the sense is always made to coincide with the close of a line, the voice will mark it; but it is universally agreed, that such a monotony is one of the greatest faults of blank verse, and that the skill of the composer is principally shown by his judicious variation of the pauses, so that they may fall upon all the different parts of the line in turn, though not in any regular order. But such a distribution cuts the matter into portions of unequal lengths; which renders it a mere fallacy of the mode of printing to assign any particular *measure* to such versification. Try, for example, to reduce to ten-syllable lines the following passage of a great master of blank verse, Akenside:

"Thee, Beauty, thee the regal dome, and thy enlivening ray the mossy roofs adore: thou,

thou, better sun! for ever beamest on th' enchanted heart love, and harmonious wonder, and delight poetic."

I think, therefore, it must be acknowledged, that whatever gratification the ear may derive from the return of equal portions of syllables or combinations of syllables, it is lost in the construction of our heroic verse without the aid of rhyme. All that is then left, is the melodious flow of the periods into which the sentences are divided, produced by a succession of such words as afford the alternacy of long and short syllables, judiciously broken by an intermixture of others. And the advocates for blank verse contend, that the unlimited variety of pauses consequent upon such an unfettered freedom of versification, is an advantage in point of melody, greatly surpassing the pleasure afforded by a jingle in the sound, which they stigmatize as a childish barbarism. As the only appeal in this case is to a well-exercised ear, and to a taste cultivated by familiarity with the

best models, it will be my object to enable you to judge for yourself on this, as on other poetical topics. I shall therefore now offer to your perusal a series of the most eminent writers of blank verse, in different manners, and on various subjects. Whatever the result be with respect to your general preference of this kind of verse, or that which has preceded it, I expect that you will be led to relish what is most excellent in both.

There is one circumstance of which I think it proper to apprize you, before you take up any of the authors I mean to recommend. The writers of blank verse have been so sensible of their near approach to prose in the versification, that they have been solicitous to give their language a character as different as possible from that of common speech. This purpose, while it has favoured loftiness and splendour of diction, has also too much promoted a turgid and artificial style, stiffened by quaint phrases, obsolete words,

and

and perversions of the natural order of sentences. When the subject is something appertaining to common life, this affected stateliness is apt to produce a ludicrous effect. Such has particularly been the case in the poems termed didactic, several of which have been written in unrhymed verse, on account of the facility with which it is composed. I do not mean to put into your hands productions of an inferior class; but you will find in some of those which enjoy deserved reputation, enough to exemplify the fault above mentioned.

As, in order to form your taste for versification in rhymed heroics, I thought it right to bring you immediately to one of the masters in that mode of composition; so I shall now direct you to one of the greatest poets, and at the same time of the most melodious composers in blank verse, that our language affords, the immortal MILTON; and his "Mask of Comus" is the

the piece with which we will make a commencement.

That kind of drama called a *Mask*, consisting of a fable in which the characters of antient mythology, or abstract qualities personified, are the actors, frequently employed the invention of Ben Jonson and others of our early dramatists, for the entertainment of the learned and somewhat pedantic times in which they lived. These pieces were almost solely addressed to the understanding and the imagination, and had scarcely any power of exciting the sympathetic feelings; they were therefore strongly discriminated from the common theatrical representations of human life and manners, and range under the head of poems rather than of plays. Milton, who from his youth was animated with the genuine fire of poetry, and whose mind was exalted by the noblest sentiments of philosophy, naturally adopted a species of composition in which his fancy would have

free

free scope, and at once gave it a perfection beyond all former example.

"Comus" is a moral allegory, founded upon a classical conception, but greatly improved both in its imagery and its morality. It represents the triumph of virtue over lawless pleasure; and the author deserves high applause for the skill with which, after exhilarating the mind with the festal gaiety of Comus, and even assailing the reason with sophistical arguments in favour of licentiousness, he finally brings over the reader to the side of sobriety by the charms of poetic eloquence. The exalted and somewhat mystic strain of the philosophy, borrowed from the Platonic school, suits extremely the romantic cast of the fable, and the high poetry of the description. As a recompense for the humiliation you may have felt on viewing the female character as pourtrayed by Pope and Swift, you may justly pride yourself on the lustre thrown around it in its virgin-purity, by this superior genius. He soars,

 indeed,

indeed, into the region of fiction, but it is fiction with the base of reality:

Hence had the huntress Dian her dread bow,
Fair silver-shafted queen, for ever chaste,
Wherewith she tamed the brinded lioness,
And spotted mountain-pard, but set at nought
The frivolous bolt of Cupid: Gods and men
Fear'd her stern frown, and she was queen o' th' woods.
What was that snaky-headed Gorgon shield
That wise Minerva wore, unconquer'd virgin,
Wherewith she freez'd her foes to congeal'd stone,
But rigid looks of chaste austerity,
And noble grace, that dash'd brute violence
With sudden adoration, and blank awe?

No one can peruse this piece without being sensible of an elevation of soul which, for a time, lifts it above the allurements of sensuality, and sanctifies all its emotions. That it was composed for the domestic representation of a family of high rank, is a circumstance truly honourable to the manners of the age. The splendour of poetry displayed in it was scarcely exceeded by the after-exertions of Milton himself; but with respect to the versification,

tion, it may be observed, that he had not yet attained the free and varied melody of his maturer productions. The pause for many successive lines falls upon the last syllable, producing that monotony, which it is the happiest privilege of blank verse easily to avoid. The measure is occasionally changed to that of seven or eight syllables with rhyme, the sprightliness of which well accords with the character of Comus addressing his crew, and with the aërial nature of the Attendant Spirit. Some lines in this measure are remarkable examples of the consonance of sound with sense:

> Midnight Shout and Revelry,
> Tipsy Dance and Jollity: &c.

Of this excellence you will meet with many more instances in the two poems which were the next productions of our author, and which I recommend to your perusal by way of interlude before you proceed to the serious study of his great

heroic

heroic performance. These are the very popular pieces "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," meant as contrasted portraits of the cheerful and the contemplative man, accompanied with the scenery proper to each. The animated strain of the verse, the variety and beauty of the imagery, and the soul of sentiment by which they are inspired, render them perhaps the most captivating pieces of the descriptive kind that all poetry affords. They are read with renewed delight till they are indelibly imprinted on the memory; and they have given birth to numerous imitations, several of which possess considerable merit. On a critical examination, the attention should be directed to the conformity of the scenery and circumstances of each piece, to the affection respectively intended to be excited; namely, innocent mirth, and elevated seriousness. In this view you will find them presenting a double set of pictures, so well characterised, that there never can be a doubt to which

series

series they individually belong. If, indeed, the observation of Jessica in Shakespear be just, ("I'm never merry when I hear *sweet* music,") the "soft Lydian airs" and "melting voice through mazes running," are somewhat misplaced as one of the pleasures of L'Allegro, though he might be consistently delighted with the "merry bells" and "jocund rebecs." But as you are a practitioner in this art, I leave you to determine the disposition of mind with which the different strains of music are accompanied.

If, in casting your eye through Milton's smaller pieces, you should be attracted to his Monody of "Lycidas," you will meet with a poem of a peculiar cast, concerning which you will probably find it difficult to fix your judgment. Tributes of sorrow to the memory of the dead under the fictitious form of pastoral were at that time very common, and they have been justly censured by Dr. Johnson and others for that want of reality which almost entirely

destroys

destroys their interest. In this piece, the ecclesiastical state of the country at that period is allegorically shadowed out under the pastoral fiction, and the writer has indulged his religious zeal while lamenting his friend. Moreover, it borrows its form from classical imitation, and abounds in allusions drawn from that source. The constructions are also occasionally harsh, and the language obscure. All these circumstances will deduct from your pleasure in reading it; yet there are passages in which I think you cannot fail to recognize the master-hand of a true poet.

I should now proceed to "Paradise Lost," but it will be proper to allow you a pause before entering upon so dignified a subject. Adieu then for the present.

Yours, &c.

LETTER X.

It will give you an exalted idea of the rank epic poetry holds amidst the productions of human genius, to be told, that there are scarcely half a dozen compositions of this class which have commanded an admiration unlimited by age or country. I believe, indeed, that strict poetical orthodoxy admits in the list of capital epic poems no more than the Iliad of Homer, the Eneid of Virgil, the Jerusalem Delivered of Tasso, and the Paradise Lost of Milton. It might be suspected that the admission of the two moderns into the favoured number was the work of national partiality: but enlightened Europe has long concurred in paying this honour to the Italian, whose language has been sufficiently familiar to the votaries of polite literature in different countries, to render

them

them adequate judges of his merit. With respect to the Englishman, it cannot be denied that his own countrymen were till a late period almost exclusively the heralds of his fame: but the increasing prevalence of the English language, and reputation of its writers, upon the continent, have produced a very extended impression of his superior genius; and his peculiar character of the sublimest of poets is acknowledged in Italy and Germany as much as in his own country.

The "Paradise Lost" is founded upon the history of the Fall of Man as recorded in the book of Genesis, to which Milton has closely and literally adhered as far as it would serve him as a guide. His additions chiefly relate to that interference of superior agents which constitutes the *machinery* of the poem, and which his own fancy has erected upon the groundwork of an obscure tradition concerning a defection of the angelic host, headed by Satan, and terminating in the expulsion of the rebels from

from the celestial mansions. It is peculiar to this poem, that what in others constitutes only an appendage to the story, here forms the principal subject; for, as it was impossible that the adventures of a single pair of human beings in their state of simplicity should furnish matter for copious and splendid narration, it was necessary for the poet to seek elsewhere for the great fund of epic action. He has therefore exercised his invention in forming a set of superhuman personages, of opposite characters, to whom he has adapted appropriate scenery, and whom he has employed in operations suited to their supposed nature. Thus he has been borne in the regions of fancy to a height never before reached by a poet; for the most ardent imagination can frame no conceptions of novelty and sublimity which may not find scope in scenes where the mightiest of created beings, and even the Creator himself, are actors, and where the field of action is the immensity of space, and the

regions of heaven, hell, and chaos. At the same time, the plan of the work provides an agreeable repose to the mind fatigued by the contemplation of dazzling wonders, in occasional descents to a new world, fresh in youthful beauty, and as yet the abode of peace and innocence. Milton's genius has been supposed best suited to the grand and elevated, chiefly because his subject was most fertile in images and sentiments of that class; but his pictures of Paradise display ideas of the graceful and beautiful, which, perhaps, no poet has surpassed.

The excellencies and defects of Paradise Lost have occupied the pens of so many able writers, that I think it unnecessary to detain you with any minute discussion of them. You may find some very entertaining papers of Addison in the Spectator upon this subject, and some masterly criticism by Dr. Johnson in his life of Milton prefixed to the edition of English Poets. I shall, however, make a few general ob-

servations

servations in order to prepare you for the perusal.

It is reckoned essential to every epic poem to have a *hero*, one on whom the principal interest of the reader is fixed on account of qualities and deeds which excite admiration. Who is the hero of Paradise Lost? It has been invidiously answered—Satan! and certain it is, that as far as courage to dare, fortitude to endure, wisdom to plan, vigour to execute, inviolable fidelity to a party, and a mind unsubdued by change of fortune, are heroic qualities, he has no competitor in the poem. The angelic host are precluded from the exertion of these virtues by a consciousness of that support from almighty power which assures them of victory in the contest; nor are they, in fact, subjected to any trials which can exalt them by successful resistance. Adam, whose weakness is the cause of the great catastrophe, has still less pretension to heroism, although the poet has thrown about him as much dignity as circumstances

cumstances allowed, and has taken especial care to assert his superiority to his frail consort. If Satan, however, is made an object of admiration on account of his great qualities, the cause in which they are exerted renders him detestable; and he loses, in the progress of the poem, all the splendour with which he was invested at the commencement. It is, indeed, a poetical fault of the piece, that a character once so conspicuous in it, should sink to insignificance and contempt before the conclusion. But Milton never forgets his main purpose of inculcating pious and virtuous sentiments, and to this, every other consideration is sacrificed.

It is in conformity with the practice of other epic poets, that a large part of the narrative in the Paradise Lost consists of a retrospective view of preceding transactions, given in the way of information by one of the personages. I know not whether, to a plain reader, unbiassed by authority, such a deviation from the natural order of

of events would prove agreeable. It certainly tends to produce a confusion of ideas, which is scarcely rectified till the story has become familiar by a second perusal. Yet there is a spirit and animation in breaking at once into the midst of the action at some important period, that perhaps more than compensates this inconvenience; and the precipitation of the fallen angels into their infernal prison is a momentous point of the history which affords a favourable opening.

The anticipation of future events contained in the visionary prospect offered to Adam of his posterity, is also authorised by the practice of other poets; and is employed to relieve the languor consequent upon the completion of the great incident of the piece. It gives scope to some fine description; yet I confess it seems to me too much to infringe the uniformity of the design, and to disturb the imagination by mixing the turbulence of the after-world with the quiet and solitary scenery of Paradise.

In the language of Milton you will find much to distinguish it from any poetic style with which you have hitherto been conversant. On a fund of simplicity are ingrafted bold and lofty figures, antique phrases, singularities of construction and position, the general effect of which is to give it an air of remoteness from common and prosaic use, and to appropriate it to solemn and elevated topics. It abounds in Latinisms, which you will discover by their deviation from the vernacular idiom, and will not have prejudice enough to admire. It has also a strong infusion of scripture phraseology, the associations of which render it peculiarly suited to his subject. It is not unfrequently obscure, through learned affectation and studied brevity; but, upon the whole, it is nervous, rich, and expressive.

In point of versification, it is agreed, that whatever can be done with blank verse to produce melody, variety, and consonance of sound with sense, has been effected in

a supreme degree by Milton in this performance. You will particularly remark, that it is rare to meet with two contiguous lines which have corresponding pauses; and that the termination on the tenth syllable occurs with no greater frequency than is necessary to mark the prevailing measure. There is a considerable intermixture of lines so imperfectly versified that they are scarcely distinguishable from prose. It is probable that the author sometimes designed these irregularities, as productive of some effect correspondent to the subject; but they may often be more justly attributed to that negligence which is so apt to intrude in a long work, and which the poet's infirmity of blindness rendered almost unavoidable. I confess, that even the authority of Milton would make me unwilling to admit that discords are ever necessary to prevent the ear from being satiated with the melody of our blank verse; and I conceive that change in the pauses will produce all desirable variety of modulation, without any infraction of the rules of so lax a metre.

The perusal of Paradise Lost has been represented by some of its most magnificent eulogists rather as a task than a pleasure. Accomplish this task, however, once with attention. Make yourself mistress of the whole plan of the work: endeavour to understand all the classical and theological allusions in it as far as notes will explain them to you, and for that purpose provide yourself with Newton's edition, or any later one equally furnished with explanations: mark in your progress the passages that most strike and please you:—and then assure yourself that you are possessed for life of a source of exquisite entertainment, capable of elevating the mind under depression, and of recalling the taste from a fondness for tinsel and frivolity, to a relish for all that is solidly grand and beautiful.

When you have gone through the Paradise Lost, you will probably feel little inclination directly to undertake the "Paradise Regained;" and indeed I would recommend the interposition of some other

author

author before you take up the resembling, but inferior, work of the same poet. I shall here, however, in order to preserve a continuity of subject, subjoin a few observations on this production of Milton's declining years.

Paradise Regained was written as a theological supplement to Paradise Lost, and it bears every indication of its subordinate character. It is grave and argumentative, little enlivened by flights of fancy or interesting situations. It has more of dialogue than action, for the latter is comprised in one event, the temptation of Christ in the wilderness; in which, the only two persons concerned are so unequal in dignity, that no doubt can ever arise as to the result. The versification of the poem is still more careless than that of the most neglected parts of the former work; and the diction is frequently flat and unanimated. Yet it contains many pleasing sketches of rural scenery; and its pictures of the three capitals, Rome, Athens, and

Ctesiphon,

Ctesiphon, are unrivalled in that species of descriptive poetry. Many of its moral sentences are likewise worthy of being retained, if you can separate them from the general mass of theological matter. I do not mean to insinuate that moral duties are best considered apart from religious principles; but Milton's system of divinity is not perhaps the most rational to which you might be directed. Yet it would not be easy to find a passage of purer theology, than that which he gives as the reply of our Saviour to Satan's defence of the love of glory, on the ground that God himself requires and receives glory from all nations:

And reason! since his word all things produc'd,
Though chiefly not for glory as prime end,
But to show forth his goodness, and impart
His good communicable to every soul
Freely; of whom what could he less expect
Than glory and benediction, that is, thanks,
The slightest, easiest, readiest recompense
From them who could return him nothing else?

The last work of our great poet is his

Samson

"Samson Agonistes," a dramatic composition, but still less than his Comus adapted to a modern stage. In this piece he has copied the severe simplicity of the Grecian theatre, whose "lofty grave tragedians," according to his own description, taught "moral wisdom in sententious precepts." This mood best suited his declining years, in which fancy was cooled, whilst every serious impression was enhanced, and had acquired additional austerity. It would be vain to expect either high poetry, or impassioned tenderness, in this performance; but what the author intended, he has well executed. He has furnished a store of weighty philosophical and pious maxims, expressed with nervous brevity; and has exhibited a striking example of patient endurance and resignation in adversity, accompanied with invincible courage. Indeed, Milton had been brought up in no school of passive submission; and it is easy to see to what events of his time he alludes in the following spirited lines:

Oh!

Oh! how comely it is, and how reviving
To the spirits of just men long oppress'd,
When God into the hands of their deliverer
Puts invincible might,
To quell the mighty of the earth, th' oppressor,
The brute and boisterous force of violent men,
Hardy and industrious to support
Tyrannic power, but raging to pursue
The righteous, and all such as honour truth!

His main purpose in this piece was to inculcate inviolable attachment to country and true religion. It has indeed been said that one of his objects in it was to write a satire against bad wives; and it must be confessed that, in the person of Dalila, he has not spared them. He has also, still more directly than in Paradise Lost, maintained the divine right of "despotic power" inherent in husbands; for it is not to be concealed, that Milton, whom you have seen almost deifying the female sex in his Comus, was in reality, both by principle and practice, a most lordly assertor of the superiority of his own. Though I would wish you to be impressed with an almost

boundless admiration of the genius of this great man, and with high veneration of his piety and morals, yet I cannot desire you to regard him, in conformity with the representation of a late panegyrical biographer, as one of the most amiable of mankind.

Adieu!

LETTER XI.

THE age in which Milton wrote his principal poem, my dear Mary, was, on various accounts, unfavourable to its reception. He had not only the misfortune of lying under the discountenance of the prevailing party on a political account, but the literary taste of the time was become totally adverse to that simple sublimity of language and sentiment by which he is characterised. What that taste was, will hereafter be considered. It gave way at length to another school of poetry; while, in the meantime, Milton continued to stand alone, an insulated form of unrivalled greatness. His excellencies, however, gradually impressed the public mind, till he obtained that exalted place in posthumous fame among the English poets, which the revolution of another century has only served to render

more secure and conspicuous. The period of imitators naturally commenced with that of his established reputation; and, indeed, the reign of blank verse in general may be dated from the prevalent admiration of Milton's poetry.

While the Miltonic style is fresh in your memory, it may entertain you to peruse one of those writers who professed to copy it with the greatest assiduity. Take up, then, the volume containing the works of JOHN PHILIPS. The first of his poems, entitled "The Splendid Shilling," is a noted piece of burlesque, in which the great poet's diction is happily employed in that grave humour, which consists in clothing a ludicrous subject in lofty terms which have already acquired associations of an opposite kind. It is unnecessary to point out the passages in which this comic resemblance is most successfully supported: you will readily discover them, and will enjoy the harmless mirth this trifle was intended to excite.

I shall

I shall not urge you to read a second description of the battle of Blenheim, after that in Addison's "Campaign." Poetry employed upon such topics can be expected to interest only while the events are recent, unless they possess extraordinary merit, which is by no means the case with this of Philips. But his poem of "Cyder," which still maintains a respectable place among compositions of its class, may be recommended to your notice.

You have already had examples of the poems called *didactic* in Gay's "Trivia," and Pope's "Essay on Criticism:" but the first of these is rather comic and burlesque than seriously instructive; and the second is more employed in cultivating the taste, than in laying down rules for critical practice. The poems strictly referable to this department are those in which verse is gravely and methodically applied to the teaching of some art or science; and of these, many instances both antient and modern are to be met with. Of the former,

one

one of the most celebrated is the "Georgics," or Art of Husbandry, of Virgil, which is said to have been a task enjoined upon that poet for political purposes by the prime minister of Augustus. Mecænas could scarcely be ignorant that real practical instruction in agriculture would be better conveyed in plain prose: but it was probably his design to foster a taste for that useful art in the Roman nobility, by allying its precepts with the charms of poetry; and in that view he could not have chosen his writer more happily. Some other didactic poems may have had a similar purpose of alluring readers to an useful pursuit, by first presenting it to the mind under an agreeable form; but for the most part, no other motive in composing works of this kind need be looked for, than that of gratifying the perpetual thirst for novelty, which, when more eligible topics are exhausted, directs the choice to the most unpromising, provided they are yet untouched. That the rules of a

 practical

practical art are in fact little adapted to shine in verse, is sufficiently obvious, and it is no wonder that some of these didactic attempts sink into mere prose. Others, however, have been rendered entertaining and poetical, by the writer's judgment in two points; first, in choosing a subject connected with grand or beautiful objects in nature; secondly, in the skilful use of digressions. Of both these excellencies the Georgics above mentioned afford an example, which has been admired and imitated by many later poets.

The art of making cyder is a branch of rural occupation not unpleasing in its general aspect, and associated with much agreeable imagery. It is the English vintage; the product of a kind of culture perhaps not less grateful to the senses in all its accompaniments than that of the grape. Pomona is no mean rival to Bacchus, and a Herefordshire landscape may vie with the scenery of Burgundian hills or Andalusian plains. Philips, however, does not paint

nature

nature like one deeply enamoured of her charms. His principal art is shown in his digressions, which are well-varied and skilfully managed. The manner in which, after an excursion, he slides back to his orchard and cyder-press, has been much admired: in this, indeed, Virgil was his pattern. I do not, upon the whole, present Philips to you as a great poet; but his "Cyder" will serve as a good specimen of the plan and conduct of a didactic poem, and will afford you some pleasing imagery. His imitation of Milton's style consists rather in copying some of his singularities of diction, and irregularities of versification, than in emulating his spirit and dignity.

The "Art of Preserving Health," by Dr. ARMSTRONG, is, in my opinion, a poem of a much superior rank. Its subject will, perhaps, at first view, seem to you too professional, and you may feel as little inclination to study physic in verse as in prose. But the author is in this work

more of a poet than of a physician, and you may be assured that his purpose was not to lay open to the uninitiated the mysteries of his art. In the view he takes of his subject, it is connected with the grand system of the animal economy, both corporeal and mental. The heads under which he arranges his matter will give you an idea of the variety of entertainment you may expect: they are, Air, Diet, Exercise, and the Passions. Of these, three at least are manifestly fertile of poetical imagery, and sufficiently detached from technical discussions. Armstrong was well qualified to make use of his advantages: he conceived strongly, and expressed himself with vigour. Sometimes, indeed, his strength is allied to coarseness, and more delicacy in avoiding objects of disgust would have been desirable: yet the mixture of this kind is not considerable; and upon the whole, he has presented a succession of images which agreeably affect the imagination. Some passages are eminently poetical, and will

bear

bear a comparison with similar ones in our most admired writers. One of these is his description of the "Reign of the Naiads," introductory to his praise of water-drinking:

> . . . . I hear the din
> Of waters thund'ring o'er the ruin'd cliffs.
> . . . .
> What solemn twilight! What stupendous shades
> Enwrap these infant floods! Thro' every nerve
> A sacred horror thrills, a pleasing fear
> Glides o'er my frame: &c.

Moral sentiment is occasionally intermixed with good effect, as it is neither obtrusive nor tedious. Thus, the precepts of temperance happily introduce an exhortation to beneficence in imparting the stores of superfluous wealth:

> . . . . Form'd of such clay as yours,
> The sick, the needy, shiver at your gates.
> Even modest want may bless your hand unseen,
> Tho' hush'd in patient wretchedness at home.

The last of these lines is, to my perceptions, one of the most exquisitely pathetic that I have ever met with.

The

The fourth book is, from its subject, almost entirely moral, and contains many valuable lessons for the conduct of life. The author moralizes, however, like a poet, and addresses the imagination as forcibly as the reason. His Picture of Anger is touched with the hand of a master:

For pale and trembling, Anger rushes in,
With falt'ring speech, and eyes that wildly stare,
Fierce as the tiger, madder than the seas,
Desperate, and rous'd with more than human strength.

The diction of this poet is natural and unaffected, approaching to common language, yet warm and picturesque. Perhaps no blank verse can be found more free from the stiffness and constraint which so commonly characterize it. The versification bears a similar stamp of ease. Without much art in varying its cadences, it has the spontaneous melody which flows from an exercised ear, and is never harsh or defective.

I shall now put into your hands a specimen of didactic poetry burthened with

a topic

a topic little favourable to the muse; in order that you may discern how far a poetic genius is able to free itself from such an incumbrance, and where it is forced to sink under it. This is "The Fleece" of DYER, a poet of no mean fame, and who united the art of painting to that of verse. He gives the design of his work in these words:

> The care of sheep, the labours of the loom,
> And arts of trade, I sing.

The first of these heads is in some measure associated with poetry by its connection with pastoral life; but the practice of a mechanic art, and the details of traffic, seem totally irreconcileable to the character of a species of writing which produces its effects by imagery familiar to the generality of readers, or, at least, easily conceived by them. A view of human happiness is, indeed, always capable of affording pleasure; but the condition of mankind in a commercial state is too remote from nature

nature and simplicity to produce those situations which poetry delights to represent. An artisan sitting at his work may be a very useful member of society; but he makes an insipid figure in description, compared to the shepherd piping to his flock, or the huntsman ranging the forest.

The spirit of Dyer's "Fleece" is truly didactic, and he has given it all the regularity which would have been expected in a prose work on the same subject. In his first book he is a breeder of sheep; in his second, a wool-stapler; in his third, a weaver; and in his fourth, a merchant. In all of these capacities his object seems to be serious instruction, and he leaves no part of the topic untouched. He teaches, however, like a poet, and neglects no opportunity of uniting entertainment with precept. He judiciously dwells most upon those parts which afford matter for sentiment or poetical description; and frequently digresses into collateral paths which lead to scenes of beauty, and even of grandeur.

He

He has also the merit of much local and appropriate imagery, which I have reason to notice with gratitude, on account of the flowers which I have borrowed from his work for the decoration of my "England Delineated." Every where he shows himself a man of benevolent and virtuous principles, and a good patriot. You will be warmed with the praises of Britain in his first book; "Hail, noble Albion, &c.;" and you will admire the dexterity with which he has turned to its advantage that humidity of its climate, which has been so often made a topic of splenetic reproach:

.... round whose stern cerulean brows
White-winged snow, and cloud, and pearly rain,
Frequent attend with solemn majesty:
Rich queen of Mists and Vapours! these thy sons
With their cool arms compress, and twist their nerves
For deeds of excellence and high renown.

This passage, contrasted with Armstrong's bitter philippic against the climate for the very same reason, curiously exemplifies the different ways in which a cir-

cumstance may be considered by minds differently disposed.

The work before us possesses great variety, but I will not affirm that it is calculated to please all tastes. To many I apprehend it must appear essentially unpoetical in its subject; and the perpetual reference to purposes of trade and commerce will, to some nice perceptions, give a taint of vulgarity to his highest-wrought descriptions. I shall leave you to take as much or as little of it as your inclination may prompt; and I shall not desire your further attention to a class of compositions which, after every effort, must remain the least inviting of the products of the poetic art.

Before we dismiss this writer, let us take notice of the two other poems by his hand, which maintain a respectable place in the descriptive class.

His "Grongar Hill" is perhaps the most pleasing piece in the language, of those which aim at local description. No attempt,

tempt, for the most part, is less successful, than that of imparting by words, distinct ideas of particular scenes in nature. The great features of wood, water, rock, mountain, and plain, may be brought before the imagination; but it groups and figures them according to models already impressed on the memory, and the picture it forms with these materials has a very faint resemblance of the reality. Dyer has judiciously attempted no more than to sketch such a prospect as may be conceived to be in view from almost any elevated summit in a picturesque country; and he has chiefly dwelt on circumstances of generality; such as those on ascending a steep and lofty hill, in the following lines:

Still the prospect wider spreads,
Adds a thousand woods and meads,
Still it widens, widens still,
And sinks the newly risen hill.
Now I gain the mountain's brow,
What a prospect lies below! &c.

It is not necessary to have climbed Gron-

gar hill, to feel the descriptive beauty of such a passage, or of most of the subsequent imagery, which consists of objects common to all similar situations. In like manner, his moral reflections on the ruined castle which forms a distinguished object in the scene, are universally applicable; as well as those on the course of the rivers, and of the optical delusions produced by distance. The facility with which the reader enters into the ideas, sensible and intellectual, of this piece, has, doubtless, been a principal cause of its popularity; to which, its familiar style and measure, and its moderate length, have further contributed.

The author has taken a loftier flight in his blank verse poem of "The Ruins of Rome," which is likewise a combination of the moral and the descriptive. Few themes, indeed, can be imagined more fertile of striking imagery and impressive sentiment, than that of the decline of such a mighty seat of empire, still displaying in its relics the

lineaments

lineaments of its former grandeur. Dyer formed his draught on the spot, and expressed with the pen what he had first copied with the pencil: hence his performance abounds with touches of reality, which give it a spirit not to be found in pictures drawn from fancy or recollection. For, objects of so singular a kind as the ruins of antient art and magnificence must be seen to be adequately represented; and no one, from his general stock of ideas, can figure to himself what bears the peculiar stamp of individuality. One might be certain that such a description as the following was taken upon the spot:

.... I raise
The toilsome step up the proud Palatin,
Thro' spiry cypress groves, and tow'ring pines
Waving aloft o'er the big ruin's brows,
On numerous arches rear'd; and, frequent stopp'd,
The sunk ground startles me with dreadful chasm,
Breathing forth darkness from the vast profound
Of ailes and halls within the mountain's womb.

The historical allusions, and moral and political reflections, are accommodated to the

the scenery, but are sufficiently obvious. One of the most striking passages of this kind is that in which the poet indulges a strain of pensive meditation on

> The solitary, silent, solemn scene,
> Where Cæsars, heroes, peasants, hermits lie.

It appears to me that this performance has not enjoyed its due share of reputation. The subject is peculiarly happy, and its execution must surely be allowed to display no common measure of poetical genius.

Adieu!

Yours, &c.

LETTER XII.

STILL keeping in the walk of blank verse, I now, my dear Mary, offer to your perusal a poem, in which the art is employed in unfolding its own nature and origin. The "Pleasures of the Imagination" by Dr. AKENSIDE is a piece of the philosophical or metaphysical kind, the purpose of which is to investigate the source of those delights which the mind derives from the contemplation of the objects presented to the senses by nature, and also from those imitations of them which are produced by the arts of poetry and painting. You have already had examples of the manner in which moral and theological argumentation ally themselves with poetry; and perhaps the effect has been to convince you that reasoning and system-building are not the proper occupations of verse. If this be admitted

admitted as a general truth, an exception may be pleaded for reasonings of which poetry itself is the object; especially if the positions advanced are made good rather by illustration, than by logical demonstration. The work before us affords a proof of the justness of such an exception; for a more splendid poem, more replete with rich and lofty imagery, will not easily be found within the range of English composition. It is true, a previous habit of speculation, and an acquaintance with the common theories of the human mind, are requisite for entering into it with a thorough relish, nor can it be fully comprehended without a close and attentive perusal. It is not calculated, therefore, to become a favourite with cursory readers, who will always prefer the easy gratification afforded by narrative and descriptive poetry. I recommend it to you, however, as an instructive exercise, which, in the first instance, will usefully employ the intellectual faculties, and will furnish your memory

with

with a store of exquisite passages, formed to dwell upon the mind after they have been well fixed by a clear view of the whole plan of which they are a part. It will be an useful preparation to read those papers of Addison, in the Spectator, on the Pleasures of the Imagination, which have served for the groundwork of this poem, and which are very elegant and beautiful prose compositions. Akenside's own account of his design, and the heads of his books, should also be attentively perused. I do not fear the imputation of partiality in further recommending to you Mrs. Barbauld's critical essay on this poem, prefixed to an ornamented edition of it published by Cadell and Davies. You cannot meet with a guide of more acknowledged taste and intelligence.

The versification of Akenside is perhaps the most perfect specimen of blank verse that the language affords. If it has not the compass of melody sometimes attained by Milton, it is free from his inequalities.

Not

Not a line is harsh or defective, and the pauses are continually varied with the skill of a master. His diction is equally the result of cultivation. It is rich, warm, and elegant; highly adorned when the subject favours ornament; chastely dignified at other times; but never coarse or negligent. It might, perhaps, be accused of stiffness, were his topics more allied to common life: but a philosophical disquisition may demand a language remote from vulgar use; and his particular school of philosophy was accustomed to a stately phraseology. His sentiments are all of the elevated and generous kind; his morality is pure and liberal; his theology simple and sublime. He was the perpetual foe of tyranny and superstition, and stands prominent in the rank of the friends of light and liberty.

Another considerable performance of this author, also in blank verse, is his "Hymn to the Naiads." The character of one of the most *classical* poems in the

English

English language will perhaps but dubiously recommend it to your favour. In fact, it sounds the very depths of Grecian mythology; and a mere English reader may well be startled at the mystical solemnity with which his "song begins."

> First of things
> Were Love and Chaos. Love, the sire of Fate,
> Elder than Chaos.

If, however, you will venture upon reading a piece with the chance of but half understanding it, you may derive some fine ideas from this Hymn, which is a product of poetry as well as of erudition.

The "Inscriptions" which follow are written upon the same classical model of lofty simplicity. They possess imagery and sentiment, but are too stiff and studied to interest the feelings. I shall reserve the "Odes" of Akenside for a future occasion.

It would be strange if among the writers in blank verse an early place were not allotted

lotted to the well-known name of THOMSON. The "Seasons" of that amiable writer yields, perhaps, to no other English poem in popularity; and, being of the descriptive kind, would properly have been one of the first offered to your notice, had not a precedence been given to the compositions in rhymed verse. It is the most considerable of all the poems which have description for their direct object; for although the moral and religious lessons to be deduced from a survey of nature were probably before the author's mind when he fixed upon his plan, yet they are rather the improvements of his subject than an essential part of it. The successive changes in the face of external nature, as modified by the changes of the year, are the proper argument of his work. Each of the four Seasons, indeed, is a separate piece, having its distinct opening and termination; and nothing appears to connect them into a general design but the concluding Hymn. They really, however, form a whole; for

they

they compose the natural history of the year; a period marked out by astronomical laws for a complete circle of those incidents and appearances which depend upon the influence of the sun upon our earth. In all the temperate climates this revolution also has a similitude to that round of being which is comprehended in the life of man. The year may be said to commence its birth with the revival of nature from the torpidity of winter. The season of Spring, therefore, is its infancy and youth, in which it puts forth the buds and blossoms of future increase. The Summer is its manhood, during which its fruits are successively proceeding to maturation. The Autumn completes its maturity, collects its stores, abates its ardour, and at length delivers it to the chill decline and final extinction of Winter. In this parallel consists that personification of the year which gives unity to its poetical history. The seasons arrange themselves into natural order, like the acts of a well-constructed drama, and

the catastrophe is brought about by an inevitable cause.

But although Thomson found the general outline of his work ready drawn to his hand, yet to fill it up adequately required both a copious stock of ideas, and judgment for selecting and disposing them. It also demanded in an eminent degree that warmth and force of painting which might give an air of novelty to objects for the most part familiar to his readers. Further, as a series of mere descriptions, however varied, could scarcely fail to tire in a long work, it was requisite to animate them by a proper infusion of sentiment. *Man* was to be made a capital figure in the landscape, and *manners* were to enliven and dignify the rural scene. Nor would the character of this writer suffer him to forget the *Great Cause* of all the wonders he described. In his mind religion mingled itself with poetic rapture, and led him from the glories of creation to the greatness of the Creator. All the changes of the year

are

are regarded by him but as "the varied God;" and this conception affords another point of union to the miscellaneous matter of the poem.

It is an advantage of the laxity of Thomson's plan, that it lays him under no obligation to enter into details of an unpoetical nature. Of natural phænomena or human occupations he is only bound to take such as sufficiently mark the revolving seasons; and of these there is an ample choice capable of being rendered striking and agreeable in description. He is not, like the poet of the Georgics, obliged to manure and till the soil before he paints the harvest waving in the wind; or, like Dyer, after the cheerful sheep-shearing scene, compelled to follow the wool into the comber's greasy shop. Art and nature lie before him, to copy such parts of their processes as are best fitted to adorn his verse.

The proper scene of the Seasons is the poet's native island, and the chief fund of description is afforded by British views and manners.

manners. Yet he has not thought it necessary to confine himself to these limits when any kindred subject suggested itself, capable of adding grandeur or beauty to his draughts. Thus he has exalted the splendour of his Summer by a picture of the climate and productions of the torrid zone; and has enhanced the horrors of his Winter by prospects taken from the polar regions. He has also introduced many views of nature of a general kind, relative to the great system of the world, and derived from the sciences of astronomy and natural philosophy. These strictly appertain to his subject, as presenting the causes of those changes in the appearances of things which he undertakes to describe. The magnitude and sublimity of these conceptions elevate his poem above the ordinary level of rural description; whilst at the same time he has judiciously avoided any parade of abstruse speculation which might prove repulsive to the generality of his readers. So extensive is the range

which

which his subject fairly permits him to take, that there is little in his work which can properly be called digression. The most deserving of this title are his descants upon civil polity, and his sketches of characters drawn from history, which have but a remote and forced connection with his peculiar topics.

Thomson was one of the first of our poets who ventured upon minute and circumstantial description. He viewed nature with his own eyes for the purpose of copying her; and was equally attentive to the beauty and curiosity of her smaller works, as to her scenes of awful grandeur and sublimity. His mind, however, seems most in unison with the latter, and he succeeds in his pictures, in proportion to their magnitude. His language also is best suited to themes of dignity: it is expressive and energetic, abounding in compound epithets and glowing metaphors, but inclining to turgidity, and too stiff and stately for familiar topics. He wants the requisite

ease for narrative; and his stories, though interesting from the benevolence and tenderness of the sentiments, are told without grace or vivacity. He has only once attempted a scene of humour, and has entirely failed. In the art of versification he does not excel. His lines are monotonous, and afford few examples of pleasing melody. They are such blank verse as is composed with little effort, and indulges the indolence of the writer.

But whatever may be the defects of this poem, it is one that can never cease to give delight as long as nature is loved and studied, and as long as liberal and dignified sentiments find sympathetic breasts. No poetical performance may more confidently be recommended to the juvenile reader, whose fondness for it is one of the most unequivocal marks of a pure and well-disposed mind. Make it the companion of your walks; lay it beside you on the garden-seat; and doubt not that its perusal will always improve your sensibility to the

charms

charms of nature, and exalt your ideas of its great Creator.

You will have discovered from the Seasons that Thomson was an ardent friend of civil liberty, and he lived at a time when writers of such a spirit met with distinguished patrons. Thus doubly inspired, he devoted a large share of his exertions to the cause of freedom, and particularly composed a long work under the title of "Liberty." As it is my present purpose to direct you solely in your poetical reading, I have no business to enjoin you a political task; and this piece of Thomson's is, in fact, little more than history in blank verse. Its sentiments are generous and soundly constitutional, and some of its pictures are well drawn; but it has more of the rhetorician than of the poet, and its general effect is tediousness. His "Britannia" is a smaller work written for the purpose of rousing the nation to war—you will probably pass it by. Nor can I much recommend to you his "Poem on the Death

of sir Isaac Newton," the sublime conceptions of which are only to be comprehended by one familiar with the philosophy of that great man, and to such an one would appear to no advantage. This may suffice for the blank verse compositions of Thomson: we shall hereafter meet with him upon other ground. But I have given you enough to occupy your attention for some time; so, for the present, farewell!

LETTER XIII.

SOMERVILLE'S poem of "The Chace" is another production in blank verse which, I think, will repay your perusal. The subject, indeed, cannot be supposed highly interesting to a young lady, whose occupations and amusements have been properly feminine: but you may feel a curiosity to be informed what those delights are, which prove so captivating to our rougher sex; and may receive pleasure from the new views of nature opened by the scenes here represented. Although this work assumes the didactic form, and the poet speaks of his "instructive song," yet I regard it as almost purely descriptive; for it cannot be supposed that our sportsmen would deign to learn their art from a versifier, and the ordinary reader of poetry has no occasion for instruction on these points. I observe, however,

however, that a prose " Essay on Hunting," written by an able practitioner, makes large quotations from Somerville; which I consider as a valuable testimony to his accuracy in description.

You will probably pass lightly over the directions concerning the discipline of the kennel, and dwell chiefly upon the pictures of the different kinds of chace. These are wrought with a spirit which indicates them to be copied from reality, and by one who felt all the enthusiastic ardour which these pastimes are calculated to inspire. If you compare them with the corresponding draughts in Thomson's Seasons, you will perceive the difference between a cold reflecting spectator, and an impassioned actor. Perhaps, however, you will be most entertained with the scene he has drawn from the description of travellers only, assisted by his imagination; I mean his splendid view of a chace conducted with all the parade of oriental magnificence, and of which the objects are some of the noblest of quadrupeds.

drupeds. He has wrought this with much poetical skill, and it forms a striking variety in the piece. Indeed, there would be danger of his throwing his English pictures quite into the shade, did not the minute and animated touches of the latter compensate for their want of grandeur. In his stag hunt he has decorated the canvas with the ladies of the court, who at that time were accustomed to partake in this diversion; and though Thomson has represented the exercise of the chace as inconsistent with feminine softness, yet it would be a fastidious delicacy not to admire

Their garments loosely waving in the wind,
And all the flush of beauty in their cheek.

The rapture with which this poet has repeatedly described the *music of the chace* will probably give you a longing to hear such heart-cheering melody; but much of its effect is owing to association, and would be lost upon one who did not follow it over hedge and ditch. I question, however,

whether

whether the most elaborate strains of modern music could produce an effect so animating as that represented in the following lines:

...... winged zephyrs waft the floating joy
Thro' all the regions near: afflictive birch
No more the school-boy dreads: his prison broke,
Scamp'ring he flies, nor heeds his master's call:
The weary traveller forgets his road,
And climbs th' adjacent hill: the ploughman leaves
Th' unfinish'd furrow; nor his bleating flocks
Are now the shepherd's joy: men, boys and girls
Desert th' unpeopled village; and wild crowds
Spread o'er the plain, by the sweet phrensy seiz'd.

These are feats worthy of Orpheus himself, and are related with a spirit congenial to the subject. The diction of Somerville is well suited to the topics which he treats. It is lively and natural, and free from the stiffness usually accompanying blank verse. His versification possesses the correctness and variety which denote a practised ear.

There remains among the blank verse poems a very celebrated work, of a kind totally different from those which we have hitherto

hitherto considered, the "Night Thoughts" of Dr. YOUNG. The originality and high reputation of this performance undoubtedly entitle it to the notice of all students of English poetry: yet I feel some hesitation in speaking of it to you in recommendatory terms. Against any bad effect it might have upon your literary taste, I think you are sufficiently fortified by the number of excellent productions which have been submitted to your perusal; but I cannot be so secure with respect to its influence upon your sentiments in more important points. "What! (it will be said) can you doubt to put into the hands of a female pupil the admired work of the pious and seraphic Young?" A short view of the spirit in which he wrote it, and the system upon which it is formed, will explain my doubts.

The writer was a man of warm feelings, ambitious both of fame and advancement. He set out in life upon an eager pursuit of what is chiefly valued by men of the world;

attached himself to patrons, some of them such as moral delicacy would have shunned, and was not sparing in adulation. His rewards, however, were much inferior to his expectations; he lived, as he himself says, "to be so long remembered, that he was forgot," and he was obliged to bury his chagrin in a country parsonage. He also met with domestic losses of the most affecting kind, and he possessed little vigour of mind to bear up against misfortune. In this state he sat down to write his "Complaint," (for that is the other title of the Night Thoughts,) at a time when he was haunted with the "ghosts of his departed joys," and every past pleasure "pained him to the heart." His first object, therefore, is to dress the world in the colours of that "night" through which he surveyed it;—to paint it as a scene

> Where's nought substantial but our misery;
> Where joy (if joy) but heightens our distress.

In his progress he endeavours to pluck

up by the roots every comfort proceeding from worldly hopes or human philosophy, and to humble the soul to the dust by a sense of its own vileness, and the inanity of every thing terrestrial. This prepares the way for the administration of the grand and sole remedy for the evils of life—the hope of immortality as presented in the Christian revelation. His view of this scheme is of the most awful kind. He conceives a wrathful and avenging God, on the point of dooming all his offending, that is, all his rational, creatures to eternal destruction, but diverted from his purpose by the ransom paid in the sufferings and death of his Son. I do not take upon me to pronounce concerning the soundness of his theology; but so deep is the gloom it spreads over his whole poem, that, in effect, it overpowers the light of his consolation. There is a kind of captious austerity in all his reasonings concerning the things of this world, that charges with guilt and folly every attempt

to

to be happy in it. Every circumstance is dwelt upon that can image life as vain and miserable; and lest any gladsome note should cheer the transitory scene, he perpetually sounds in the ears the knell of death. Such a picture of this world, I am sure, is ill calculated to inspire love for its Creator; and I think it as little fitted to foster the mutual charities of life, and put men in good humour with each other. What a contrast to the amiable theology of the Seasons!

I cannot wish therefore that the Night Thoughts should become your favourite—that you should ponder over it, and make it your closet companion. Yet, as a work of genius, it is certainly entitled to admiration; and many of its striking sentences concerning the abuse of time, the vanity of frivolous pursuits, the uncertainty of human enjoyments, and the nothingness of temporal existence compared to eternal, are well worthy of being impressed upon the memory. No writer, perhaps, ever equalled

equalled Young in the strength and brilliancy which he imparts to those sentiments which are fundamental to his design. He presents them in every possible shape, enforces them by every imaginable argument, sometimes compresses them into a maxim, sometimes expands them into a sentence of rhetoric, sets them off by contrast, and illustrates them by similitude. It has already been observed, in speaking of his Satires, how much he abounds in antithesis. This work is quite overrun with them; they often occupy several successive lines; and while some strike with the force of lightning, others idly gleam like a meteor. It is the same with his other figures: some are almost unrivalled in sublimity; many are to be admired for their novelty and ingenuity; many are amusing only by their extravagance. It was the author's aim to say every thing wittily; no wonder, therefore, that he has often strayed into the paths of false wit. It is one of his characteristics to run a thought quite out of breath;

breath; so that what was striking at the commencement, is rendered flat and tiresome by amplification. Indeed, without this talent of amplifying, he could never have produced a work of the length of the Night Thoughts from so small a stock of fundamental ideas.

I cannot foresee how far the vivacity of his style, and the frequent recurrence of novel and striking conceptions, will lead you on through a performance which, I believe, appears tedious to most readers before they arrive at the termination. Some of the earlier books will afford you a complete specimen of his manner, and furnish you with some of his finest passages. You will, doubtless, not stop short of the third book, entitled "Narcissa," the theme of which he characterises as

> Soft, modest, melancholy, female, fair.

It will show you the author's powers in the pathetic, where the topic called them forth to the fullest exertion; and you will

probably

probably find that he has mingled too much fancy and playfulness with his grief, to render it highly affecting.

The versification of Young is entirely modelled by his style of writing. That being pointed, sententious, and broken into short detached clauses, his lines almost constantly are terminated with a pause in the sense, so as to preclude all the varied and lengthened melody of which blank verse is capable. Taken singly, however, they are generally free from harshness, and sometimes are eminently musical.

I now dismiss you from your long attendance on the poets of this class, and remain

Your truly affectionate, &c.

LETTER XIV.

In restoring you, my dear Mary, to the company of those writers who have cultivated English poetry in what is generally deemed its most pleasing and perfect form, it is my intention without delay to enlarge your acquaintance with different modes of versification, and to familiarize your ear with those specimens of it which have proved most agreeable to refined judges.

We will begin with a poet who has employed more art and study in his compositions than almost any other; in consequence of which they are few, but exquisite in their kind. This is Gray, a man of extensive erudition and highly cultured taste, whose place is generally assigned among the lyrical writers, though his cast of genius would have enabled him to attain

equal excellence in any other form of elevated poetry.

The "Odes" of Gray are pieces of great diversity both with respect to subject and manner. The "Ode on Spring," and that "On a distant Prospect of Eton College," unite description with moral reflection. In the first of these the imagery has little novelty, but is dressed in all the splendour and elegance of poetical diction. You will remark the happy choice of picturesque epithets in such instances as "*peopled* air," "*busy* murmur," "*honied* spring," &c. in which a whole train of ideas is excited in the mind by a single word. The second is new in its subject, and the picture it draws of the amusements and character of the puerile age is very interesting. Yet the concluding imagery of the fiends of vice and misfortune, watching in ambush to seize the thoughtless victims on their entrance into life, presents one of the gloomiest views of human kind that the imagination ever formed.

The author's melancholy cast of thought appears with more dignity and moral instruction in his "Hymn to Adversity," which, if not one of the most splendid, is perhaps the most finished of his compositions. The sombre colouring, relieved with the brighter touches of benevolence, admirably harmonizes with the subject.

I do not mean to make remarks on all Gray's smaller pieces; but his "Fatal Sisters," from the Norse tongue, is worthy of observation, not only for the new vein of mythological imagery which it and the subsequent piece open, but on account of its measure. This consists of stanzas of four lines, each composed of seven syllables, long and short alternately. If its effect upon your ear resembles that upon mine, you will feel it to possess extraordinary spirit and animation, and to be singularly fitted for subjects of warmth and action.

The two Pindaric Odes of this writer are the productions which have principally

contributed

contributed to his eminence among lyric poets. The term *pindaric*, originally derived from the name of the celebrated Greek poet, had been assumed by Cowley and others to denote compositions which were characterised by nothing but their irregularity. This character extended not only to their subjects, but to their versification, which consisted of verses of every length and modulation, forming unequal stanzas, without any return or repetition of the same measures. But this laxity was found not to be justified by classical example, which, in its correct models, provided regular returns of similarly constructed stanzas. On this plan Gray has framed the versification of his two odes; and upon examination you will find in each the mechanism of a ternary of stanzas trebly repeated in corresponding order. Whether much is gained by this artifice in point of harmony, you will judge from your own perceptions: to me, I own, the return seems too distant to produce the intended effect;

and

and in reading, I am unable to take in more than the melody of the current stanza. The measures, however, considered separately, are extremely melodious, and in general well adapted to the sense. Probably the English language does not afford examples of sweeter and richer modulation.

The Greek motto prefixed to the first of these odes, "The Progress of Poesy," implies that it was addressed to the intelligent alone; and indeed a familiarity with antient learning greater than falls to the lot of most readers, even of the male sex, is requisite for entering into its beauties. If you should be able to discover little more in it than fine words and sonorous verses, you need not be greatly mortified: even critics have misunderstood it, and scholars have read it with indifference. The truth is, that no poem can be interesting without an express subject perspicuously treated; and that obscure allusions and shadowy images can make no strong and durable impression on the mind. The proper theme of this piece

is

is lost in glittering allegory, and the illustrations are too scanty and too slightly touched to answer their purpose.

The "Bard" has gained more popularity, because it begins with presenting to the imagination a distinct historical picture of great force and sublimity, and such as might be transferred to canvas with striking effect. The figure of the prophetic poet on his rock, the "long array" of Edward winding down the side of Snowdon, the awe-struck and alarmed chieftains, are conceived in a truly grand style. The subsequent sketches from English history, though touched with the obscurity of prediction, yet present images sufficiently distinct, when aided by the previous knowledge of the reader. There is, however, too much of enigma in the lines hinting at the future race of English poets, nor does their introduction seem well suited to the awful situation of the speaker. A poet of more invention, too, would have avoided the sameness of alluding to Shakespear and Milton

at the close of both his odes. A greater fault appears to me the fiction of the *magical web*, borrowed from the Scandinavian superstition. It has no proper place in the costume of a Welsh bard; and (what is a greater incongruity) the weaving is only imaginary, since the Bard's fellow-labourers are spirits of the dead: it could not, therefore, upon any supposition, operate as a *cause* of the disastrous events which are depicted. Yet this notion is clearly implied by the lines

> Now, Brothers, bending o'er th' accursed loom
> Stamp we our vengeance deep, and ratify his doom.

A poet has a right to assume any system of supernatural machinery he pleases, as if it were a real mode of operation, provided he be consistent in the use of it. But it was Gray's talent to gather from all parts of his multifarious reading, images, and even expressions, that struck him as poetical, which he inserted in his compositions, sometimes with happy effect, some-

times

times with little attention to propriety. Thus, in this poem, borrowing Milton's noble comparison of Satan's great standard to a "meteor streaming to the wind," he applies it to the "beard and hoary hair" of the bard; where it is altogether extravagant.

The work of this poet which readers of all classes have most concurred in admiring is his "Elegy in a Country Church-Yard." No performance of the elegiac kind can compare with it either in splendour or in dignity. Not a line flows negligently; not an epithet is applied at random. Sensible objects are represented with every picturesque accompaniment, and sentiments are impressed with all the force of glowing and pointed diction. The general strain of thinking is such as meets the assent of every feeling and cultivated mind. It consists of those reflections upon human life which inspire a soothing melancholy, and peculiarly accord with that serious and elevated mood in which true poetry is most relished.

relished. There are, however, some obscure passages; and the connexion of the thoughts is not always manifest. It may also be questioned whether a good effect is produced by calling off the attention from the real fortunes and characters of the inhabitants of a village, to those of the imaginary poet with whose epitaph the piece concludes. There seems no reason why we should be introduced to him at all, unless curiosity were to be better gratified concerning him; and his address to himself, ("For thee, who mindful of th' unhonour'd dead,") with the subsequent account of his own death, strangely confuses the reader's imagination. Notwithstanding these defects, however, this poem has merited that extraordinary popularity which has been testified by innumerable imitations, parodies, and translations into antient and modern languages. Its success affords a remarkable proof of the power of poetry, which, by the charm of melodious verse and splendid diction, could raise so

much

much admiration and interest from so slender a fund.

The fragments of great undertakings to be met with in Gray's works show that nature had not been bountiful to him in the faculties requisite for a poet of the first class, and that his vein, when not supplied from the stores of memory, was soon exhausted: for it would be too indulgent to suppose that he *could* have finished these designs in the spirit with which he commenced them. The finest of these, the "Essay on the Alliance of Education and Government," is a noble specimen of heroic poetry; but it is evident that he had lavished away the most picturesque ideas belonging to his subject, and had run his fancy out of breath.

The name of MASON, the friend of Gray, has generally accompanied his as a modern competitor for the lyrical laurel; and although the late period to which he survived has prevented his works from being inserted in the collections of English poets,

yet I shall recommend to your perusal such of them as are found in a volume printed many years ago, and received with public approbation. These chiefly consist of Odes, Elegies, and Dramatic Poems.

The Odes of this writer bear the same character of high polish and elaborate effort which distinguishes those of his friend. Every artifice which has been practised for elevating language into poetry is sedulously employed, and ornaments are scattered throughout with a lavish hand. The effect produced is that the reader's attention is rather drawn to the detail, than to the plan and general scope of his pieces. They resemble an apartment richly furnished, and adorned with a profusion of carving and gilding, over which the eye wanders from part to part, little regarding the symmetry of the whole, or the company which occupies it. After reading an ode of Mason's, no one distinct impression dwells on the mind, but a confused recollection of glittering imagery and melodious verse. The

abstract

abstract nature of their subjects generally precludes interest, and they neither warm to enthusiasm nor melt to sympathy. Yet their splendid descriptions and exalted sentiments indicate no ordinary measure of poetical powers, though perhaps misled in their application by a false taste. Where the author's propensity to deviate into the flowery paths of digressive imagery was controlled by an animated subject, he has shown himself not deficient in spirit and energy. That ode in "Caractacus" beginning

> Hark! heard ye not yon footstep dread,

was admired by Gray as one of the sublimest in the language. It is to be lamented that an air of puerility is thrown over it by the petty artifice of alliteration, which is repeated so as to become almost ludicrous:

> I mark'd his mail, I mark'd his shield,
> I spy'd the sparkling of his spear.
>
> Deal the dole of destiny; &c.

The

The reduplication of the same letters in these lines gives such an appearance of studied trifling, that good taste would have rejected it if offering itself unsought, instead of taking pains to search for it. A chastised judgment will, I believe, seldom approve a more liberal use of this device, than occasionally to produce a consonance of adjective and substantive, or verb and noun.

Several of Mason's most laboured odes are introduced in his "Elfrida" and "Caractacus," which are altogether *poetical* dramas, and may therefore make a part of your present course of reading. The poetry in them, especially in the latter, is often worthy of admiration. As tragedies they have not been successful; and I imagine the attempted revival of the Greek chorus will never be adopted by a real genius for the stage.

Probably you will be better pleased with the elegies of Mason than with his lyric productions. Referring to real life and manners, their sentiments are more natural; and their

their descriptions have less of the glare of gaudy ornament. In the second elegy there is a very elegant sketch of a pleasure-ground in the modern improved taste, which may be regarded as a prelude to his later didactic poem "The English Garden." His "Elegy on the Death of a Lady" (the admired countess of Coventry) will doubtless particularly interest you. The description of female beauty with which it commences, is wrought to a polished brilliancy that Pope himself could not have surpassed:

> Whene'er with soft serenity she smil'd,
> Or caught the orient blush of quick surprise,
> How sweetly mutable, how brightly wild,
> The liquid lustre darted from her eyes!
>
> Each look, each motion wak'd a new-born grace,
> That o'er her form its transient glory cast:
> Some lovelier wonder soon usurp'd the place,
> Chas'd by a charm still lovelier than the last.

The lesson drawn from her untimely fate, though awful, is not repulsively gloomy; and although there is some incorrectness in the reasoning concerning a future

future state, it is upon the whole impressive and well pointed.

I shall here close my remarks on a writer, the propriety of whose introduction in this place may be questioned; though I can feel no hesitation in recommending to your notice, wherever you may meet with them, any of the productions of one whose moral merits render him always an instructive companion, while his poetical excellencies can scarcely fail of making him an agreeable one.

I remain very affectionately,

Yours, &c.

LETTER XV.

I SHALL now request my amiable pupil to open the volume containing the works of COLLINS, a poet whom I consider as having possessed more original genius than either of the two last mentioned, though a short and unhappy life did not allow him to elaborate his strains to equal perfection. Like Pope, he first tried his powers in the humble walk of pastoral, and produced his "Oriental Eclogues;" which, notwithstanding the little esteem which the author himself afterwards expressed for them, may claim the merit of quitting the ordinary ground of rural poetry, and enriching it with new imagery. The eclogues are all characterised by purity and tenderness of sentiment, by elegant and melodious verse. Two of them, "The Camel Driver," and "The Fugitives," likewise contain much appro-

appropriate description, and present some striking pictures. That the writer had a strong conception of scenes fitted for the pencil, further appears from his "Epistle to Sir Thomas Hanmer;" in which, after a lively sketch of the progress of dramatic poetry in modern times, he suggests that mode of illustrating the beauties of our great dramatist by the kindred art of painting, which has since taken place, so much to the honour of the liberal undertaker; and he gives spirited draughts of two designs for this purpose.

The fame of Collins is however principally founded upon his "Odes Descriptive and Allegorical," pieces which stand in the first rank of lyrical poetry. Of these, some are exquisitely tender and pathetic, others are animated and sublime, and all exhibit that predominance of feeling and fancy which forms the genuine poetic character. Some are shrowded in a kind of mystic obscurity that veils their meaning from the common reader; but no one who is qualified

fied to taste the higher beauties of poetry can fail to receive delight from the spirit of his allegorical figures, and the vividness of his descriptive imagery. His versification is extremely varied, and several of its forms are peculiar to himself. The free irregular flow of some of his strains gives them the air of being the spontaneous product of present emotion, like the voluntaries of a master musician; and no English poet seems to have possessed a more musical ear. One of the most successful experiments of the employment of blank verse in lyric measure is presented in his "Ode to Evening;" but I am not sure whether we are not rather cheated into forgetfulness of the verse by the force of the description, than brought deliberately to acquiesce in the want of its accustomed decoration.

The most striking of his Odes is that entitled "The Passions." It is said to be composed for music; but I doubt whether

its fitness for that purpose be not rather according to the poet's conception than the musician's, which are often found to be widely different. The concluding stanza, indeed, seems to confess that the author expected little from the alliance of modern music with Poetry. The idea of representing the passions as performers upon different instruments is a happy one, and their manners and attitudes are in general highly characteristic. The figure of Hope is enchanting, and her strains are some of the sweetest the English language affords. I am not judge enough of music to decide on the propriety of making both Melancholy and Cheerfulness select the horn as their instrument; but the contrasted effect of their different tones is finely painted. I know not a more animated group of figures than those which the "hunter's call" sets in motion:

The oak-crown'd Sisters, and their chaste-eyed Queen,
Satyrs and sylvan boys were seen,
Peeping from forth their alleys green;

Brown

Brown Exercise rejoiced to hear,
And Sport leapt up and seiz'd his beechen spear.

Some readers have been disappointed at missing *Love* among the impassioned fraternity. Possibly the author thought that it was no single passion, and that it was nothing more than hope, despair, jealousy, &c. pointed to a particular object. But in truth, perhaps from being ill used by the capricious deity, he seems to have regarded him with ill will, and to have been ambitious of emancipating poetry from its subserviency to his designs. Thus where, in his "Ode to Simplicity," he laments the degradation sustained by the Roman muse from the loss of that quality, his proof of this declension is taken from the exclusive prevalence of the amatory strain:

No more, in hall or bower,
The Passions own thy power,
Love, only love, her forceless numbers mean.

If, however, the Ode on the Passions is

defective

defective in this particular, and inaccurate and unequal in some other respects, yet it bears that precious stamp of genius which cannot fail to secure its place among the noblest compositions of the class.

The "Ode to Fear" abounds in strong and appropriate imagery. The affection of terror is justly accounted a source of the sublime; and there is none which the imagination of poets has been more occupied in exciting. That Collins was keenly sensible of its influence appears from his unfinished "Ode on the Superstitions in the Scotch Highlands," where those of the gloomy and terrific kind are described with great force of painting. But he also partook largely in the tender affections, to which several of his finest productions are devoted. The "Odes to Pity and to Mercy" are of this class. The picture in the latter, of Mercy personified as a female, with her bosom bare, pleading for the life of a youth fallen under the arm of a stronger warrior, is exquisitely touching. The

"Dirge

"Dirge in Cymbeline," the "Ode on the Death of Colonel Ross," and the "Ode on the Brave fallen in Battle," are admirable pieces of this class, in which feeling and fancy are associated as they exist in the mind of a genuine poet—and such Collins undoubtedly was, though his faculties were blasted by misfortune before they arrived at their full expansion.

I shall employ the remainder of this letter in some remarks upon one or two other lyric poets whose works may claim your attention.

It is to be regretted when a man of real talents mistakes his powers, and hazards by unsuccessful attempts the loss of part of the reputation he had acquired by former exertions. This is generally admitted to be the case with respect to AKENSIDE as a writer of odes. His compositions under this title are so numerous, that we must suppose he felt pleasure and expected fame from the employment; yet there is scarcely one which excites any thing like rapture in the

the reader. They are not devoid of poetry, either in the sentiments or the diction; but they are stiff and inanimate, without the enthusiasm of the loftier ode, or the amenity of the lighter. He has tried a great variety of measures; but some displease by their monotony, while others present changes of length and modulation which have no apparent correspondence with the sense, and add nothing to the melody. Several of them are upon amatory topics, but never was a colder worshipper at the shrine of Venus than Dr. Akenside. He is much more at home in his patriotic strains; and if any thing strikes fire from his bosom, it is the idea of liberty. His Odes to the earl of Huntingdon, and the bishop of Winchester, possess much dignity of sentiment with considerable vigour of expression.

Much happier, in my opinion, in his lyrical performances, is a writer greatly inferior to Akenside in poetical renown, and chiefly known in other walks of literature. This is SMOLLETT, the novelist, historian, and political

political writer, who has left a few specimens of his powers as a poet, sufficient to inspire regret that he did not cultivate them to a greater extent. His "Tears of Scotland," and "Ode to Leven Water," are pieces of great sentimental and descriptive beauty; but his "Ode to Independence" rises to the first rank of compositions of that class. It opens with great spirit, and much fancy is displayed in the parentage and education of the personified subject of the piece. The travels of Independence form a series of animated historical sketches; but it would have been more correct to have included Albion in the track of his peregrinations, than to have made it his birth-place. The concluding stanza, in which the poet lays aside fiction, and draws a sober picture of life and character, gives a fine moral termination to the whole. If excellence is to be judged of by effect, I know few pieces that can be compared to this Ode for the force with which it arrests the reader's attention, and the glow of sentiment which

which it inspires. Mason's ode on the same subject appears tame and insipid in the parallel.

I could readily direct you to more compositions of the lyric class, which are by no means rare in English poetry; but those already pointed out will suffice for examples of the various styles and manners adopted by the writers who have most excelled.

If you should have become enamoured with what an humorous writer has called "cloud-capt ode," you may indulge your taste at small expense by turning over a set of old Magazines or Annual Registers, in which you will not fail to find two elaborate compositions of the kind every year, by a person dignified with the poetic laurel. The small advantage this official bard has often derived from his prescribed subject, has put him upon exerting all the powers of his invention to bring in collaterally something worthy of the expectations of his illustrious auditors. And as the office, during the present reign, has been in the

possession

possession of men of respectable talents, some very extraordinary efforts have been made to elevate these periodical strains above the mediocrity of former times. I do not, however, seriously recommend to you a course of defunct birth-day odes; it would be too severe a trial of your perseverance. Sufficient for the year are the odes of the year.

Adieu!

LETTER XVI.

THE writers to whom you have been lately directed must have made you familiar with that figure to which poetry is so much indebted—*personification.* It is this which by embodying abstract ideas, and giving them suitable attributes and action, has peopled the regions of fancy with a swarm of new beings, ready to be employed in any mode that the invention may suggest. The lyric poets have been satisfied with a slight and transient view of these personages. They usually begin with an invocation, follow it with a genealogy and portrait, and having paraded their nymph or goddess through a few scenes of business, in which she is in continual danger of reverting to a mere quality, finally dismiss her.

Others, however, have not chosen so

readily

readily to part with the creation of their fancy. They have framed a fable, in which the imaginary being may have full scope for its agency, and have bestowed upon it auxiliaries and adversaries, a local residence, and all other circumstances serving to realise their fiction. This fable is an *allegory*. You have probably met with some of these in your prose readings, and have been entertained and instructed by them in the pages of Addison and Johnson. As they are, however, essentially poetical in their nature, they seem peculiarly suited to verse. There was a period in which the English poets, deriving their taste from the Italian school, were extremely addicted to this species of invention, and indeed carried it to a wearisome excess. Although the taste has in a great measure passed over, it is worth while to become acquainted with some of the best productions of the class, since they hold no mean place among the offspring of the human intellect. I shall therefore now introduce you to an

author

author who, if antiquity had been the ground of precedence in our plan, ought to have received your earliest homage: but it was necessary to have acquired a strong relish for poetry before he could safely be put into your hands; for I will not conceal from you, that it requires no small share of perseverance to become possessed of the beauties of *the divine* SPENSER.

His "Faery Queen" is by much the most considerable allegorical poem in our language; and in many respects it deserves the reputation which through two centuries it has enjoyed. Its plan, indeed, is most singularly perplexed and incoherent; and as the work is unfinished, it would be entirely unintelligible had not the author himself given a prefatory explanation of it. The term *faery* is used by him to denote something existing only in the regions of fancy, and the *Faery Queen* is the abstract idea of Glory personified. The knights of faery-land are the twelve virtues, who are the champions or servants of the queen. The

British

British prince Arthur, who is the subject of so many fabulous legends, becomes enamoured of the Faery Queen in a vision, and comes to seek her in faery-land. He is the image of perfect excellence, and is regarded as the general hero of the piece. Each book, however, has its particular hero, who is one of the virtues above mentioned, and who goes through a course of adventures modelled upon the tales of chivalry, and having for their object the relief of some distressed damsel, or other sufferer under wrong and oppression. He encounters giants, monsters, enchanters, and the like, who are the allegorised foes of the particular virtue of which he is the representative; and prince Arthur, the general hero, occasionally appears as his auxiliary when he is hard pressed.

Thus far there is some consistency in the plan; but the poet had the further view of paying his court to queen Elizabeth, the great topic of all the learned adulation of the age. She is therefore typified by the

person

person of the Faery Queen, and several incidents of her history are related under the veil of allegory: the principal personages of her court are likewise occasionally alluded to in the characters of the faery knights. Moreover, the supposed real history of Arthur and other British princes is interwoven with the tissue of fictitious adventure. It is impossible to conceive a more tangled skein of narrative, and the author could scarcely expect that any reader would take the pains to unravel it. In fact, no one at present regards this poem in any other light than as a gallery of allegorical pictures, no otherwise connected than by the relation several of them bear to one common hero. It would be no easy matter to form one consistent allegory of any single book, and to explain the emblematical meaning of every adventure ascribed to its particular knight. Yet in many instances the allegory is sufficiently plain and well-supported; and to run through the work as some readers do, merely amus-

ing themselves with a tissue of marvellous incidents, like those of the Seven Champions of Christendom, without any search after the "truth severe in fairy fiction drest," is a degradation of the author, and an injustice to themselves.

A hint which I have given you concerning *perseverance* will perhaps make you cast an eye on the length of this work, and inquire whether you are expected to go through the whole. Although we possess but one half of the author's design, six of his books being said to have perished at sea, I am not so unreasonable as to enjoin an uninterrupted perusal of the long, and, it must be confessed, rather tedious succession of combats, enchantments, and romantic adventures which fills the six remaining ones. All I wish is to give you a full taste of his peculiar excellencies, which you will find to consist in wonderful strength of painting, and an inexhaustible invention in the creations of fancy. When you have got through the two *legends*

gends of Holiness and Temperance, you will perhaps find your curiosity so much awakened as to induce you to proceed. In the first of these you cannot fail to be struck with the allegory of Despair, which in force of painting and correctness of application yields to no fiction of the kind, antient or modern. Indeed, its effect is very much owing to the near approach the fiction makes to reality. Substitute to the *Genius of Despair* a gloomy fanatic employed in preaching the terrific doctrines of reprobation and eternal misery, and you convert the phantom into a human being. There will then remain nothing more of the supernatural than some of the accompaniments. He accomplishes his purpose entirely in the natural way of persuasion, and his subtle arguments are admirably adapted to plunge the soul into that state of desperation which is preparatory to self-destruction. Their gradual operation upon the mind of the Red-cross Knight is managed with great skill; and words never

drew

drew a picture of more vivid expression than that of the final paroxysm of his passion:

He to him raught a dagger sharpe and keen,
And gave it him in hand: his hand did quake,
And tremble like a leafe of aspin greene,
And troubled blood through his pale face was seen
To come and goe with tidings from the heart,
As it a running messenger had been.
At last resolv'd to work his final smart,
He lifted up his hand, that backe againe did start.

The cave of Mammon in the second book is extremely rich in scenery and figures, and impresses the imagination with the wonders of an Arabian tale. The danger impending over the Knight of Temperance were he to touch the least part of the riches displayed before his eyes, is a fine stroke of moral allegory, well exemplifying the nature of avarice. The whole fable of the Bower of Bliss is highly poetical, but its beauties are chiefly copied from Tasso and Ariosto.

It could not be expected that so copious

an invention as that of Spenser, at so early a period of English literature, should be uniformly regulated by propriety and good taste. We must not be surprised, therefore, to find many of his images disgusting and extravagant; and his allegories frequently rendered incongruous by the mixture of objects of reality with objects of similitude. Thus *Error* is made to disgorge both *books* and *reptiles:* the former belong to the intellectual notion of error as an abstract quality; the latter, to its type or representative, imaged under the form of a serpent-like monster. It will be an useful exercise to examine his fictions in this respect, and to detect their inconsistencies. In truth, the allegorist, who undertakes to create, as it were, a nature of things of his own, peopled with ideas instead of substances, engages in a task more arduous than he is probably aware of, and is fortunate if he avoids absurdities.

The language of Spenser will appear to you uncouth, and at first scarcely intelligible.

ligible. In reality, it was that of no one period, but was framed by the author with a large admixture of obsolete words and phrases, in order to give it the venerable air of antiquity. Other poets of different countries have practised the same artifice, which, I confess, appears to me unworthy of true genius. There are, indeed, in most languages, expressions of peculiar energy and significance, which have been preserved for poetic use after they have ceased to make a part of common speech. But this privilege is only due to their intrinsic value; and when it is extended to such terms as have been replaced by more apt ones, the only effect is rudeness and incongruity. Spenser, however, had another reason for the latitude he has assumed in his vocabulary. The measure he has employed nearly resembles the ottava rima or eight-lined stanza of the Italians, with a terminating alexandrine. This obliged him to provide four, and three, similar rhymes for each; which, in the English language,

language, is a burthensome task, and it is extraordinary that any one should find patience enough to accomplish it in a performance of the length of the Faery Queen. He could surmount the difficulty only by taking every advantage that poetical license would allow; and he has therefore made no scruple of forcing into the service of rhyme every word of any age or parentage which, however imperfectly, would accommodate itself to the sense. If an enemy to rhyme wished to argue against it from the improprieties of diction to which it gives rise, he might find proofs of the fact in every page of this poem; and certainly there can be no gratification derived from such a complicated system of rhyme which it is worth while to purchase at such a price. The stanza of Spenser, however, possesses a fullness of melody which is extremely pleasing to the ear. On this account, notwithstanding the difficulty of execution, it has been copied by several poets, who have managed it with extraor-

dinary

dinary address. They have generally, at the same time, adopted many of the obsolete words of the author; a practice which succeeds well in parody or burlesque, but appears to me ill-suited to grave and dignified topics. Some of these imitations, however, are poems of considerable merit. I shall point out one or two to your notice.

Perhaps the most pleasing of all allegorical poems in Spenser's manner is THOMSON'S "Castle of Indolence." It is, indeed, one of the capital performances of this writer, and would alone have entitled him to poetical eminence. The description with which it opens presents a most delightful rural scene, and prepares the mind for a favourable hearing of the subsequent address of the wizard or enchanter Indolence. This potent being is represented as acting, like Spenser's Despair, by the force of persuasion; and a more eloquent harangue is nowhere to be met with than that which the poet puts into his mouth. I know not, indeed, whether

ther it is not almost too persuasive for the moral effect of the piece, especially when enforced by the delicious picture of the life led in this mansion of pleasure. No wonder that the poet himself was too well disposed to become a subject of the Power whose allurements he so feelingly describes; and we may believe that he spoke from his heart when he exclaimed

> Escap'd the castle of the Sire of sin,
> Ah! where shall I so sweet a dwelling find?

Yet the bard of Industry is a truly animated orator; and the reader is judiciously left under the impression of his strains, which may finally incline the balance to the right side.

The birth and education of the Knight of Arts and Industry, with his progress through different countries in the glorious labour of civilizing mankind, is a fine piece of allegorical personification. His final settlement in Britain is a patriotic idea, which has foundation enough in truth

to

to obtain ready admission with an English reader, whose bosom cannot fail to glow with the noble eulogy pronounced on his country:

> He lik'd the soil, he lik'd the clement skies,
> He lik'd the verdant hills and flowery plains.
> Be this my great, my chosen isle, he cries;
> This, while my labours Liberty sustains,
> This queen of ocean all assault disdains, &c.

Some of the subordinate personifications are touched with great spirit; such as those of the diseases to which the votaries of indolence become a prey. It is to be observed, however, that they are made passive rather than active beings, distinguished merely by the symptoms of those maladies they are supposed to inflict. This is a kind of incongruity from which allegory is rarely free. It is so obvious a mode of characterising one of these fancy-formed persons, to imbue him strongly with the quality meant to be represented, that poets have seldom adopted any other. Thus,

Anger

Anger is painted as a man in a fit of rage; Fear, as one flying from a terrific object; and the like. This method succeeds very well when they are only figures represented in a show or pageant; but when they are made actors in a fable, a difficulty often arises as to the manner of their agency. For if the quality be of a passive or quiescent nature, its employment in any violent action, such as that of encountering a foe, or destroying a victim, appears an incongruity. Diseases figured as *patients* are very unfit for *agents*; for what is the action of Lethargy "with deadly sleep opprest," or "swoln and unwieldy" Hydropsy? Thomson has strangely confounded the two conditions of acting and suffering. In the compass of four lines he has the Tertian "shaking his chilling wings;" the "sleepless" Gout "counting the morning clocks;" and Apoplexy "knocking down Intemperance." I shall not pursue this vein of criticism any further,

but

but leave you to examine particular instances according to the rules resulting from the preceding observations.

We have several other allegorical pieces written in Spenser's style and manner, and deserving the praise of ingenuity; but I do not wish to detain you longer with a species of fiction which, when managed with the greatest skill, is apt to prove tiresome. In fact, however we may admire the dexterity with which abstract qualities are converted into persons, and engaged in adventures suitable to their nature, the want of reality must ever render such a fable little interesting, and the reader's mind will be perpetually distracted between attention to the obvious story and to the concealed meaning. A well-contrived allegory is a continued riddle or enigma; and there are few who are not soon fatigued with the exertion necessary for a full comprehension of such a piece of artifice. I shall therefore dismiss the imitators of

Spenser with the notice of one who has employed his manner for a different purpose, that of giving a sort of burlesque dignity to a subject drawn from humble life.

The "School-mistress" of SHENSTONE is accounted the happiest effort of that writer, who is distinguished rather for elegance of sentiment than for high poetic powers. He has here, however, presented us with a work of great excellence; for a performance which was never read without pleasure and interest, and was never forgotten by any reader, well deserves that title. It somewhat resembles Gay's pastorals in exactness of delineation, and the mixture of the comic with the tender; but Shenstone is more seriously pathetic than that writer. Nothing can be more natural than the portrait of the good dame with all the little accompaniments of her dwelling and garden. The incident of the poor little boy under correction is at the same time

humorous

humorous and touching; and hard must be the heart which is not moved to sympathy when

> His little sister doth his peril see.

The children sporting on the green, and the tempting dainties "galling full sore th' unmoney'd wight," are circumstances of much simple beauty. Trivial as is the topic of the piece, I know few poems which display more good sense or a more benevolent heart. It is one of those which leave impressions not only pleasing but meliorating. From the time I first read it, the view of children at play has excited in me sensations of tender pleasure that I can scarcely describe; and I seldom fail mentally to repeat

> Heav'n shield their short-lived pastimes! I implore.

Farewell!

LETTER

LETTER XVII.

We have lately, my dear Mary, wandered so far into the regions of fancy, that there is nothing of the artificial and recondite character in poetry which may not now take its turn. I shall therefore make you acquainted with a writer once not surpassed in fame by any English poet, though now almost consigned to neglect,—the witty and ingenious Cowley. He has undergone this fate not through want of genius, for he was at the head of his class, but through the radical defects of that kind of writing which he adopted in compliance with the bad taste of the age. Almost every writer, both in prose and verse, who then aimed at reputation, sought to distinguish himself by the novelty and remoteness of his conceptions, by the faculty of combining the most dissimilar ideas, and finding out hidden re-

semblances in things the most unlike. Their object was to dazzle and surprise; and, in attaining this, they necessarily missed the much superior ends of affecting and persuading. They struck out latent sparks of meaning from the collision of words, but such as just flashed and disappeared. This class of poets has been termed the *metaphysical;* and Dr. Johnson has subjoined to his life of Cowley a character of them, illustrated by examples from their works, which is a most entertaining and instructive piece of criticism, and well merits a perusal. You will think it sufficiently excuses you from reading any other of these authors; and I by no means wish you to take more of Cowley himself than so much as may agreeably acquaint you with his style and manner. Such are the number and variety of his pieces, that I believe I must take upon myself the office of pointing out to you individually those which in my opinion are best worth your notice.

Of

Of his "Miscellanies," the ode entitled "Of Wit" is remarkable as an exercise of the quality it describes. You will probably derive no accurate idea of it from his description; but it is singular that he should enumerate among the defects of those who aim at wit, some of the characteristics of his own school. Thus, censuring the profusion with which glittering thoughts are sometimes heaped together, he says,

> Yet 'tis not to adorn and gild each part;
> That shows more cost than art.
> Jewels at nose and lips but ill appear:
> Rather than all things wit, let none be there.

He further observes, that it is not wit

> .... upon all things to obtrude
> And force some odd similitude.

The poem "On the Death of Mr. William Hervey" has more of the heart in it than is usual with Cowley. In that respect it may be advantageously compared with Milton's

Milton's Lycidas, which, like this, is the lamentation of one academic youth for another. The following stanza is particularly natural and touching:

He was my friend, the truest friend on earth;
A strong and mighty influence join'd our birth;
Nor did we envy the most sounding name
  By friendship giv'n of old to fame.
None but his brethren he and sisters knew
  Whom the kind youth preferr'd to me;
  And ev'n in that we did agree,
For much above myself I lov'd them too.

The ballad called "A Chronicle" is certainly the sprightliest pleasantest thing of the class in our language. The idea of comparing a succession of mistresses to a line of sovereigns is supported with wonderful fancy and vivacity; and the concluding enumeration of the arts and instruments of female sway is very elegantly sportive. The talent of trifling with grace is commonly thought no part of English genius; but our liveliest neighbours may be challenged to produce a happier trifle than this chronicle.

chronicle. Cowley has displayed similar ease and vivacity of style in his "Anacreontiques," which are free translations or paraphrases of the Greek bard; and in his "Acme and Septimius" from the Latin poet Catullus. In all these pieces the verse is generally smooth and the expression natural.

The "Complaint," besides its poetical merit, is interesting from its reference to the writer's own life and character. He gives himself the title of "the melancholy Cowley," and, like many others of the fraternity, attributes all his ill success in the world to his devotion to the Muse. He recounts his disappointments not without a degree of dignity; but it is unpleasant to find a man of genius and learning participating so much with the vulgar in his feelings respecting fortune. Dyer has shown a more elevated spirit where, having just touched upon the theme of neglected merit, he checks himself with "Enough! the plaint disdain."

The

The "Hymn to Light" is a piece in his best peculiar manner. It abounds with imagery as splendid and changeable as the matter which is its subject, and resembles that *galaxy* to which he has dispraisingly compared superabundant wit. The verse is extremely melodious, and the diction often exquisitely poetical. The thoughts are sometimes fine, sometimes fanciful; but upon the whole it is a work of which Cowley alone was capable.

The set of poems connected by the title of "The Mistress," though termed "love verses," have as little real love in them as if they were written on a system of logic. They are, in fact, exercises of wit upon certain given topics, which might have been composed by an academic or monk in a cloyster, who had never known the fair sex but from books. They are not proper to be presented to a young lady in the mass, yet one who could pick skilfully might find some harmless amusement. I shall, however, only desire you to read the

two

two pieces "For Hope," and "Against Hope," as being extraordinary specimens of that inventive ingenuity which can turn a thought every possible way, and illustrate it by every imaginable comparison. There is a pretty epigrammatic stanza in the piece entitled "The Waiting Maid," which you may perhaps recollect as quoted in the Spectator:

> Th' adorning thee with so much art
> Is but a barbarous skill;
> 'Tis like the poisoning of a dart
> Too apt before to kill.

Probably the greatest effort of Cowley in his own estimation was his "Pindaric Odes," a species of composition for which, according to his idea of it, he might seem well fitted, from the unrestrained variety of his conceptions. He made his first essays in a free version of some of Pindar's odes, which I will not desire you to peruse; for what amusement are you likely to find in the obscure tales of antient mythology, and the adulation of forgotten horse-racers?

His

His own Pindarics are more worthy objects of curiosity, though it is allowed that he mistook his genius in aiming at the sublime, which in him soon loses itself in extravagance, or sinks into familiar trifling. His thoughts and measures are equally unbridled, and run wildly without purpose or object. There are, however, some fine strains of both which will repay the search; and one advantage to be derived from all Cowley's productions is, that they cannot be hurried over in a negligent perusal, but require attention to discover and taste their beauties. But that you may not waste this attention unprofitably, I will mention as the odes most likely to entertain you, "The Resurrection," "The Muse," and "Life and Fame."

Cowley's genius was still less fitted for epic poetry than pindaric. His unfinished attempt in this way entitled "Davideis" may therefore be safely neglected, for its few splendid passages do not compensate the tediousness and bad taste of the whole.

I would

I would wish you, however, to turn to the third book, l. 785, where you will find a very poetical and melodious lyric ode, supposed to be addressed by David to Michal. It is extraordinary that this poet, who, from this and others of his productions, appears to have had a very nice perception of metrical melody, should have been habitually so negligent in his versification, which in general is full of false prosody, and is bound by no rules. The poets of the metaphysical school were particularly subject to this fault, which was probably owing to their fullness of thought, that was continually struggling for utterance, and allowed no time or place for correct modulation. Donne, the father of this school, was so careless in this respect, that his pieces can scarcely be termed verse; and his example seems to have perverted the rest.

Some of Cowley's most pleasing poetical effusions are inserted in his prose essays, which are very agreeably written, and may be recommended to your perusal. They

are

are printed along with his poems. Many of them (both the prose and the verse intermixed) turn upon that taste for rural retirement which was a ruling passion in him, or, at least, appeared so to himself. The images of such a life are so generally delightful, that nature seems to have pronounced it the condition best suited to human beings; yet there are too many examples of disappointment in the happiness it was expected to afford; and Cowley himself, when he was enabled to put his wishes into execution, found the most essential part wanting, a temper for enjoyment. A truly amiable character, however, shines through his writings, and their serious strains are all calculated to promote sentiments of piety and philanthropy.

From the grave and the sportive employment of wit, we may naturally proceed to the use of it in satire and burlesque; and in BUTLER's "Hudibras" we shall find an example of this kind which stands unrivalled in the poetic art. The purpose of

this

this work was to throw ridicule upon that party which subverted the monarchy and church of England in the time of Charles I. Their reign, indeed, was over before the appearance of this poem, and it might seem unnecessary to attack a humiliated faction; yet their principles were far from being extinct, and to expose them to contempt was no mean service to the opposite cause. Accordingly, Hudibras became a great favourite with the court and royalists: it was relished by a king who was himself a man of wit, and its severity gratified the party animosity of those who perhaps valued it on no other account. At this distance of time it is read merely as a literary performance; and its merits are fairly estimated without scrutinizing the justice of its satire, or the motives of its author.

The fable of this burlesque heroic is copied from Don Quixote. It consists of the adventures of a fictitious knight-errant and his squire, who are the representatives of the two most prevalent sects among the

par-

parliamentarians,—the presbyterian and independent. The knight is described as a man of multifarious but whimsical and pedantic erudition; the squire, as a prating and dogmatical fanatic; and both, as deeply tinctured with hypocrisy and knavery. The piece has less action than conversation. The author's talent does not seem to have lain in the invention of incident, but he is inexhaustible in matter of argument and all that relates to opinions. So much learning was perhaps never since the days of Rabelais applied to a comic purpose. He likewise possessed the faculty of bringing together the most dissimilar ideas, and linking them by odd and fanciful connexions,—the characteristic of ludicrous wit. He had, withal, a fund of good sense and observation of mankind, which gave him a clear perception of the ridiculous in manners and character. Besides the leading topics of his satire, he has incidentally touched upon several other points in which men are deluded by false science or grave imposition;

so that he is a writer not only to be laughed with, but from whom real instruction is to be derived; and he has furnished a variety of sentences which, enforced by the humorous language in which they are expressed, have passed into proverbial maxims. No one has contributed more than he to throw ridicule upon the imposture of judicial astrology, which was a folly once extremely prevalent, and by no means worn out at the period of his writing.

You will readily conceive that a work which corresponds to the preceding description is not calculated for hasty and uninformed readers; and indeed the learned and historical allusions in Hudibras are so numerous, that they have afforded ample matter for the annotations of scholars. It will be necessary for you to procure some assistance of this kind; nor will I promise, after all, that you will enter enough into the spirit of the performance to derive much pleasure from it. There are defects which will not fail to strike you. It drags to-

wards

wards the conclusion; yet it is an unfinished work, nor does it clearly appear what the author intended to make of it. The personages of the story are so contemptible, that no one cares what is to become of them. It must also be confessed, that the diction and imagery are not free from coarseness and vulgarity. Butler has been famous for his double rhymes, which often, from their oddity, heighten the ludicrousness of the matter; yet they are frequently halting and imperfect, and the style and versification in general are careless and slovenly. In these respects he is much inferior to Swift, who, with more ease and true familiarity, has also, in his best pieces, an air of good company which Butler wants.

I shall direct your attention to one more poet of the witty class, who deserves a distinguished place among original writers, though making a small figure in the collection from the bulk of his productions. This is GREEN, a modern author, princi-

pally known by his admirable poem on "The Spleen." His purpose in this work was to suggest the most effectual preservatives against a foe to human happiness, which was a great object of dread half a century ago under the name he has adopted, and is not less formidable at present under those of *low spirits* and *weak nerves*. Like a skilful physician, he enumerates the causes of this mental disease, and the most potent antidotes to their influence; and he offers a remedy for a fit of the spleen in his poem itself, made up of a most agreeable compound of shrewd observation, lively description, and rational philosophy, seasoned with wit and fancy. Butler himself has not in the same compass more striking assemblages of remote ideas. Green is particularly happy in allusion, or the application of known facts, or passages from authors, in a new sense. Thus, recommending exercise as a cure for the spleen, he says,

Fling but a stone, the Giant dies.

News

News he calls "the manna of a day;" and speaking of the power of beauty over old-age, which "blood long congealed liquefies;" he adds, alluding to the pretended miracle of St. Januarius's head,

> True miracle, and fairly done
> By heads which are ador'd when on.

His metaphors are often exceedingly apt and striking. He gives Spleen a magic-lantern, with which she throws frightful figures over the scene of life. The precise religionists, he says,

> ..... samples of heart-chested grace
> Expose in show-glass of the face.

Poems are "the hop-grounds of the brain;" and scruple is the "spasm of the mind." These images sometimes shoot into short allegories, very ingeniously supported; of which the comparison of law to a forest, and the voyage of life with which the piece concludes, are examples. The latter is a common idea; but I am acquainted with

with no instance in which it is wrought up with so many well-adapted particulars.

The philosophy of Green is not of the exalted kind which has been adopted by some of the moral poets whose works have come before you, but which perhaps has rather adorned their verse than directed their conduct. His is a refined decent epicurism, not however devoid of generous principles. He seems to have despaired of rendering the world wiser or better, but to have aimed at rendering himself so. He has sketched the plan of life he desired to lead, in a *wish*, that, of all the poetical castle-building I ever met with, appears to me the most reasonable. I doubt not, however, that in practice, the want of steady employment would be found to deduct greatly from the imaginary felicity; and that all the other sources of pleasure which he so agreeably describes would prove inadequate to repel the intrusions of spleen. As his system is exclusively calculated for our sex, I find nothing in it of the pre-

ceptive kind to recommend to you, except that you should endeavour, with him, to become one of those votaries of Contentment,

> By happy alchemy of mind,
> Who turn to pleasure all they find.

Green's other pieces are all worth your perusal. "The Sparrow and Diamond" is a lively picture of the struggle between avarice and tenderness in a female breast. The "Seeker," and the poem "On Barclay's Apology," may half tempt you to turn quaker, for which sect the author had a manifest partiality. The "Grotto" must be at least twice read before it is fully comprehended; but it will repay that labour. It is as witty and poetical as his "Spleen," though strangely desultory.

Green ranks among the minor poets; but I confess I would sacrifice many writers of whole tomes in the collection rather than part with him.

To the triumvirate in this letter I am not tempted to make any addition; I therefore close the subject with subscribing myself

Your truly affectionate, &c.

LETTER

LETTER XVIII.

HAVING thus, my dear pupil, in a method perhaps scarcely perceptible to you, but never absent from my own mind, led you through all the principal departments of poetical composition, in such manner as to afford you a comparative view of the productions of the most eminent English writers in each, I shall now, without further regard to method, point out to you some of those among the remainder who appear to me best worthy of your attention, and give you my ideas of their peculiar excellencies. Such an exercise of the judgment may spare you much fruitless and tiresome reading; for so little selection has been employed on the volumes that fill your shelves, that a considerable portion of them, though dignified with a place among those entitled "the English Poets,"

by way of distinction, are characterised only by dull mediocrity, or tasteless rant. I do not assert that they contain nothing worthy of perusal; but a great passion for poetry and abundance of leisure are requisite to compensate the labour of the search.

It would be unjust to confound with such unsuccessful votaries of the Muses, TICKELL, the friend of Addison, and, in some degree, the rival of Pope. Few poets of that age equal him in elegance of diction and melody of versification; and if he does not display powers of invention of the first class, his thoughts generally please by their justness and ingenuity. None of his pieces are void of some appropriate merit. The poem "On the Prospect of Peace" is one of the best of the political class: its adulatory strains are not trite and vulgar, but expand in an agreeable variety of imagery. The "Imitation of the Prophecy of Nereus," and the "Epistle to a Gentleman at Avignon," possess much merit as party poems; but the

the union of party and poetry will probably afford you little pleasure. "Kensington Garden" is a pretty fancy-piece; not correct, indeed, in its mythology, since it blends the fiction of the fairy system with that of the heathen deities,—but elegant and picturesque in its descriptions.

"Colin and Lucy" you have probably met with in song-collections, where it has a place as one of the most beautiful of modern ballads. The pathetic strain which he has there touched upon in a fictitious subject, he has pursued in reality on occasion of the death of his great friend and patron Addison. His elegiac poem on this event has perhaps no superior of its class in the language, for the justness of its sentiments, and the serious dignity of its poetry. The picture of the funeral in Westminster-abbey, the allusions to the moral and literary character of the deceased, and the strokes of feeling for personal loss, have all that stamp of truth, which interests beyond the most brilliant

 creations

creations of the imagination. I have already made a comparison between the exertions of Milton and of Cowley on a similar topic. Notwithstanding their superiority of fame and genius, I do not hesitate to give the preference to this piece of Tickell, if it be the province of elegiac poetry to touch the heart, rather than to amuse the fancy.

Tickell was probably incapable of reaching the loftiness of the highest kind of lyric poetry, yet his "Ode to the Earl of Sunderland," on his installation at Windsor, is a composition of great merit. It has, indeed, no daring flights, no rapid transitions, no sublime obscurities: it proceeds in a clear and even tenor of elevation; and the poet's flame, like that of the hero he celebrates, "burns calmly in his breast."* There is, however, much spirit in the description of the knights of former times,

> The flow'r of chivalry! who drew
> With sinew'd arm the stubborn yew,

Or

Or with heav'd pole-axe clear'd the field,
Or who in justs and tourneys skill'd,
Before their ladies' eyes renown'd,
Threw horse and horseman to the ground.

A more ingenious comparison can scarcely be found, than that between the modern knights of the garter who have been admitted on account of civic and pacific merits, and the "gentler constellations" placed in the heavens by "letter'd Greece." The sentiments of this piece are wise and laudable; and the regularity of the measure suits the style and subject.

I am in doubt whether to recommend to your notice a poem once famous, the "Dispensary" of Dr. Garth. It ranks among the mock-heroic, a species of composition in which an uncommon union of wit and poetry is requisite to ensure success. Its subject was of a too confined and temporary nature to be long interesting; nor indeed, when recent, was it distinguished for humour. There is some good serious poetry in it, though unskilfully introduced.

troduced. On the whole, it has not much claim to escape the oblivion to which it seems hastening.

About the same period there were two dramatic writers of great eminence, CONGREVE and ROWE, the first in comedy, the second in tragedy; who, besides, obtained reputation in other kinds of poetry, and are received among the English poets. Yet they are now little read in that capacity, and only a few of their compositions deserve attention. If Dr. Johnson's sentence be just, that Congreve's miscellaneous pieces "show little wit and little virtue," I should be wrong to recommend them at all to your perusal; and indeed the little that is good in them is scarcely worth the pains of selecting from the bad or indifferent. I may, however, just mention his "Ode on Mrs. Arabella Hunt singing," which has something at least very like fine poetry, with a mixture of something equally like nonsense. The description of Silence personified, with its

accompaniments, is carried much beyond the power of the most vigorous conception to follow. Try what image you can "body forth" from these lines:

> An antient sigh he sits upon,
> Whose memory of sound is long since gone,
> And purposely annihilated for his throne.
>
> ....
>
> A melancholy thought, condens'd to air,
> Stol'n from a lover in despair,
> Like a thin mantle, serves to wrap
> In fluid folds his visionary shape.

We have had painters daring enough to pourtray Milton's Death, though it had "no shape distinguishable in member, joint, or limb;" but he would be a bolder artist who should attempt a figure of Congreve's Silence.

In his "Elegy on Cynthia weeping and not speaking" he indulges his fancy less, and more consults the natural expression of feeling. That he was well able to ally passion with poetry, he has proved by his single tragedy of "The Mourning Bride," which

which presents some fine examples of this union.

Rowe, however, stands at the head of our poetical tragedians; and were the drama our subject, I should venture some remarks upon *tragedy considered as a poem*, which might perhaps support a higher estimate of his merits than modern taste seems to have established. Of his general poetry, his "Translation of Lucan's Pharsalia" is the most considerable work, and it maintains a respectable rank among our metrical versions of the classics. It has, however, that fault from which poetical translation is seldom free,—exaggeration; and this, as the original is inclined to extravagance, has betrayed him into some whimsical instances of bombast. He likewise runs into prolixity: but to transfuse the sense of one of the most nervously concise of Latin writers into English couplets, is a task of so much difficulty, that it claims liberal allowance.

Of his miscellaneous pieces, I can only recommend

recommend to you as excellent, three pastoral ballads, which, for tenderness and true simplicity, appear to me almost unequalled in that kind of composition. "Despairing beside a clear stream" is written in a measure which has since become popular by being adopted by Shenstone and others. In its subject, it may be advantageously compared with Prior's "Alexis," which it surpasses in natural expression. "The Contented Shepherd" very pleasingly personates that unambitious character which is supposed to mark the true lover, to whom the affection of his mistress is more than all the world besides. The piece written on the sickness of the lady addressed in the former, to whom he was afterwards united, is exquisitely tender and pathetic. These humble productions place Rowe higher in my estimation as a poet, than his elaborate birth-day odes, and political eulogies; yet the poem to lord Godolphin upon our military successes is no mean performance.

The

The title of "Fables for the Ladies" will naturally attract your attention to a work of Edward Moore. This author was a man of parts and agreeable pleasantry, and is known as well by his periodical paper "The World," as by his poems, and plays of "The Foundling" and "The Gamester." His "Fables" are written in an easy familiar style, and possess considerable merit, both moral and descriptive. Most of them, indeed, have the fault so common in this species of fiction,—that of neglecting the proper nature and manners of the animals introduced, and making them mere human creatures in a brutal form. Who can yield a momentary assent to such a supposition as that of a leopardess courted by a monkey, fox, and goat; or of a ewe-lamb married to a wolf? The prefaces to the fables are often sprightly and elegant moral lessons, which derive little additional force from the subsequent fictions. Such is that against neglect of neatness, beginning

Why,

Why, Cælia, is your spreading waist
So loose, so negligently lac'd?

that against affectation;

I hate the face, however fair,
That carries an affected air:

and that which describes

The nymph who walks the public streets,
And sets her cap at all she meets.

It will be an useful task to commit these short pieces to memory, as mementos for the regulation of conduct in what the French call *les petites morales*, and which are by no means of trifling importance to your sex.

The three concluding pieces, written by HENRY BROOKE, author of "The Fool of Quality," rise much beyond the rest in point of poetry. They have not, indeed, much of the character of fable, for which species of composition they are too long, and superabundant in sentiment in proportion to the narrative; but they are delightful as moral tales. The description of conjugal

conjugal affection in the "Sparrow and Dove" is charming; and the fall of innocence and its recovery in the "Female Seducers" is both highly poetical and sweetly pathetic. The address of Virtue to the "little trembler" is particularly striking, and partakes of the sublime.

The poems of Lord LYTTELTON may be recommended to you, as certain to afford some pleasure, and free from every thing that can offend. Elegance of language, delicacy and propriety of sentiment, and an even tenor of correct versification, are their characteristics. These are qualities, indeed, to be found in many of the poets of a refined age, and of themselves are insufficient to raise a writer to distinction; but Lyttelton has some peculiar claims to notice, especially from the fair sex. He appears to have felt the tender passion with equal ardour and purity, and to have fulfilled every duty both of a lover and a husband. In the former capacity his most considerable production is

"The

"The Progress of Love" in four eclogues. Of this, Dr. Johnson thinks it sufficient to say that "it is a *pastoral*;" which title, in his estimation, implied affectation and insipidity. I do not think it the better for the mixture of pastoral fiction, which is supported only by the trite language and imagery of rural life; but one who has felt love will probably give the author the credit of having entered with success into the various turns of that passion. His "Songs" and other short poems are agreeable displays of that tender affection which at length rendered him happy in a well-sorted connubial union; as his "Monody" is the expression of those sentiments of past felicity and present grief which succeeded the untimely dissolution of that tie. This piece, however, is rather an eloquent enumeration of topics of praise and regret, than the artless effusion of uncontrolled emotions: yet there are some strokes of natural and pathetic lamentation which cannot fail to excite sympathy.

Lord

Lord Lyttelton has shown his friendship for the fair-sex by an epistle of "Advice," which, notwithstanding the ridicule bestowed upon it by lady Mary Wortley Montague, may be read with pleasure and advantage. Though a very young adviser at that time, he displays no inconsiderable knowledge of character and manners. I must, however, enter a protest against the following maxim:

> One only care your gentle breasts should move,
> Th' important business of your life is *love*.

Unless love be here used in the extended sense of all the charities of life, all that is endearing and attaching in human society, I should say that he degrades the female character by his limitation.

I have been in some doubt whether to desire you to take up again the volumes of Shenstone. You will find in him nothing equal to his "School-mistress;" nothing, indeed, which has not some marks of feebleness and mediocrity: yet he has attained

tained a degree of popularity which may be admitted as a proof of merit of a certain kind, and as a reason against total neglect. You will scarcely, I think, overcome the languor of his long elegies, notwithstanding their melodious flow and occasional beauties. A life spent in dissatisfaction with himself and his situation, in sickly gloom and unrelished leisure, was not likely to inspire vigorous strains; and the elegiac tone assumes deep and fixed despondence in the effusions of his imagination. The last of these pieces, in which he deplores the consequences of a licentious amour, has been generally admired. It touches upon the true pathetic, though mingled with the fanciful.

The "Pastoral Ballad" in four parts is probably the most popular of all his productions. Many persons, I believe, suppose both the measure and the manner to be of Shenstone's invention; but I have pointed out a better specimen of both in Rowe. Simplicity of language and sentiment was

the

the writer's aim; it is, however, no easy thing to attain the grace of this quality, without bordering upon its next neighbour, inanity. Shenstone has not been able entirely to hit this point: yet he has several strokes of natural and tender feeling, as well as passages of pleasing rural imagery, which he drew from original sources.

His poem entitled "Rural Elegance" is worth reading on account of its descriptions of the modern art of landscape gardening, of which he was an early and distinguished practitioner. The following lines are a very picturesque sketch of the principal operations of that art:

Whether we fringe the sloping hill,
Or smooth below the verdant mead,
Whether we break the falling rill,
Or through meand'ring mazes lead,
Or in the horrid bramble's room
Bid careless groups of roses bloom,
Or let some shelter'd lake serene
Reflect flow'rs, woods, and spires, and brighten all the scene.

The "Dying Kid," the "Ballad of

Nancy

Nancy of the Vale," and some of the songs, which are tender and delicate in their sentiment, have afforded pleasure to readers who are not too fastidious in their ideas of excellence. I believe they will do so to you; nor do I wish to foster in you that sickly nicety of taste, which refuses to be pleased with what is really beautiful, because it is not presented in the most perfect form.

Adieu!

LETTER XIX.

My task now, my dear Mary, draws to a conclusion; for although, since the time of Shenstone, several poets have appeared who have enjoyed their day of reputation, and have been consigned to posterity in the volumes of collections, yet few of them have survived even this short interval in the voice of popular fame. I have one, however, to mention who may be considered as fully established in his seat among the most eminent of the poetical fraternity, and whose works are as much consecrated by the stamp of public applause as if they had received the approbation of centuries. This is Goldsmith, one of the minor poets, with regard to the bulk of his productions, but perhaps the immediate successor of Dryden and Pope, if estimated by their excellence.

His

His two principal pieces, "The Traveller" and "The Deserted Village," come under the head of descriptive poems; but the description is so blended with sentiment, and so pointed and consolidated by a moral design, that they claim a higher place than is usually allotted to that class of compositions. It is true, Goldsmith was more of a poet than of a philosopher or politician; and therefore it is rather for the entertainment than the instruction that they afford, that these performances are to be valued; yet there is much in them to warm the heart as well as to delight the imagination.

It is not derogatory to the merit of Goldsmith's poetry that it is calculated to please the general taste. The qualities by which it effects this purpose are, remarkable clearness and perspicuity of style; a natural unaffected diction that rejects every artifice of speech which has been employed to force up language into poetry by remoteness from common use; and a warmth,

energy, and variety, which never suffer the attention to languish. His imagery is all taken from human life and natural objects; and though frequently new to the generality of readers, is easily comprehended. His sentiments, if not always accurately just, are such as obtain ready admission, and find something correspondent in every breast. The nervous conciseness with which they are expressed imprints them on the memory, while the melodious flow of his verse gratifies the ear, and aids the impression.

The poem of "The Traveller" consists of a descriptive sketch of various European countries, with the manners and characters of the inhabitants, drawn by the author on the spot, for the moral purpose of contrasting their advantages and disadvantages, and deducing the general maxim, that the former are balanced by the latter, and that the sum of happiness does not greatly differ in any. Whatever be thought of the truth of this proposition, it must be

acknowledged

acknowledged that national pictures were never before drawn with so much force and beauty; and the reader is at a loss whether most to admire the representations of visible nature presented to his fancy, or the moral portraitures addressed to his understanding. The different figures are also happily placed for the effect of contrast; the hardy Swiss after the effeminate Italian, and the phlegmatic Hollander after the volatile Frenchman. As the writer generally adheres closely to his topic, he has introduced few adventitious ornaments; but such as he has employed are in good taste: his similes in this and the companion piece are eminently beautiful.

The " Deserted Village " is the enlargement of a topic just touched upon at the close of the preceding poem; the supposed depopulation of the country in consequence of the encroachments of luxurious opulence. The writer imagines a village, which from infancy he had known happy in all the humble charms and pleasures of rural

life,

life, delivered at length to the hand of desolation under the sway of a single unfeeling master, while its former inhabitants are driven to exile in transatlantic emigration. It is in the contrast between these two states of prosperity and desertion that the descriptive part of the poem consists; and the design affords much scope both for the picturesque and the pathetic. Views of rural life are indeed among the commonest products of poetry, and it was difficult to avoid the beaten track of imitation in treating such a subject. But Goldsmith wisely drew from the sources of his own observation. He did not go to a fancied Arcadia for the draught of an English village, but made a copy of the reality, warm from the life, and coloured with the vivid tints of a truly poetical imagination. Every circumstance is selected with the taste and feeling of one who was thoroughly acquainted with the effect of his art. What an interesting picture (if we may so call it) has he composed of *sounds*, where he describes

scribes the "village murmur" striking with softened tones upon the distant ear, and conveying notices of all the various business going on among the human and animal inhabitants!

The swain responsive as the milkmaid sung,
The sober herd that low'd to meet their young,
The noisy geese that gabbled o'er the pool,
The playful children just let loose from school,
The watch-dog's voice that bay'd the whispering wind,
And the loud laugh that spoke the vacant mind.

His internal view of the village, with its principal personages, the clergyman and schoolmaster, is admirably drawn. The portrait of the former may vie in dignity and interest with Dryden's Country Parson; and though they are so similar in subject and effect, Goldsmith's exhibits no marks of imitation, but is perfectly original. The schoolmaster is a comic painting, but extremely natural, and free from caricature. The same may be said of the alehouse, with its furniture and company; and good-nature will excuse the indul-

gence

gence with which the enjoyments of the poor are treated, even when verging to excess. It is, indeed, to the credit of Goldsmith's heart, that he always appears the poor man's friend; and the erroneous notions which he has adopted on some points, were probably suggested by the keen indignation he felt against those hardened sons of wealth and ease, who seem to grudge their inferiors any share of those pleasures in which they themselves revel without control. The pictures of the ruined and forsaken female, and of the group taking a last farewell of their beloved village, are beautiful touches of the pathetic. On the whole, this poem is one of those which take possession of the heart and imagination with irresistible sway, and can scarcely satiate by repeated perusal.

The other pieces of Goldsmith are trifles, but such as denote the man of original genius. "The Haunch of Venison" and "Retaliation" are humorous productions, in which the familiar style is very happily employed.

employed. The latter pleasantly exhibits the author's talent at drawing characters. The light satire in some of these sketches is seasoned with good-humoured praise, so as to make up a very palatable compound to the persons concerned; with the exception of Garrick, whose foibles are drawn with too much force to be obliterated by commendation. Accordingly, it provoked a more severe though less witty retort from the great actor.

The "Hermit" is a specimen of the ballad, divested of that rusticity which is its usual character, yet preserving an elegant and cultured simplicity. The story is not a good one; but there are many pleasing passages in the piece, and the moral sentiments are expressed with great neatness. That it has none of the trivial phrases and insipid repetitions of the antient ballads, will be objected to it only by those whose taste is vitiated by antiquarian pedantry.

Of the remaining compositions I shall

notice only one, and that for the purpose of showing the power of versification *alone* in giving the grace of poetry to a simple sentiment, unadorned by any of those flowers of diction which some suppose essential to the poetical character. Plainer words cannot be found than those which compose the following "Stanzas on Woman."

When lovely Woman stoops to folly,
  And finds too late that men betray,
What charm can sooth her melancholy,
  What art can wash her guilt away?

The only art her guilt to cover,
  To hide her shame from every eye,
To give repentance to her lover,
  And wring his bosom, is—to die.

I confess, however, they have to me a charm beyond that of almost any piece of the kind with which I am acquainted. This effect is, doubtless, partly owing to the pathos of the sentiment itself, and the skill with which it is wrought to a point. But surely the melodious flow of the lines, joined

joined with the recurrence of agreeable sounds in the double rhymes, operates as a powerful auxiliary to the sense. Many of the best songs in our language, and almost all those of the French, turn in like manner upon a single striking thought, expressed with simple conciseness, in elegant versification.

An example of what may be done by strong sense, learning, and cultivated taste towards producing valuable poetry, without a truly poetical genius, is afforded by several pieces in verse of the celebrated Dr. SAMUEL JOHNSON, whose great name in literature has been acquired by his prose compositions. The walk in which a writer so qualified is most likely to succeed, is that of the morally didactic. Energy of language, vigour and compass of thought, and correctness of versification, are the principal requisites for the moral poet; and few have possessed them in a higher degree than the author in question.

His imitations of two satires of Juvenal,

under the title of "London," and "The Vanity of Human Wishes," are, perhaps, the most manly compositions of the kind in our language. The Roman poet is distinguished by the earnest and pointed severity of his invective, as well as by the force of his painting, and the loftiness of his philosophy; and the imitation does not fall short of the original in these respects, whilst it is free from its grossness and impurity. The "London" indeed, written in the earlier part of Johnson's literary career, while he was a warm oppositionist in politics, and had scarcely acquired that confirmed relish for the metropolis which afterwards characterised him, has a considerable mixture of coarse exaggeration. The other piece possesses more calm dignity; and the examples drawn from modern history to parallel those from antient history in the original, are, for the most part, well chosen. That of Charles of Sweden is written with peculiar animation. The conclusion, which is sublime in the Latin,

Latin, is as much more so in the English, as the theology of the modern writer was superior to that of the antient. Nobler lines than the following were never composed:

> Yet when the sense of sacred presence fires,
> And strong devotion to the skies aspires,
> Pour forth thy fervours for a healthful mind,
> Obedient passions, and a will resign'd;
> For love, which scarce collective man can fill,
> For patience, sovereign o'er transmuted ill;
> For faith, that panting for a happier seat,
> Counts death kind nature's signal for retreat.

Both these imitations have an excellence to an English reader not always found in compositions of this class—that of being complete in themselves, and not depending for their effect upon allusion to the originals.

The same vigour of thought and style has made Johnson the author of the finest prologue our language can boast, with the exception, perhaps, of Pope's to Cato. It was written on the occasion of opening the

the Drury-lane theatre in 1747, and was meant to usher in that better choice of plays which took place under the management of his friend Garrick. The sketch of the vicissitudes of the English drama is drawn with justness and spirit, and the concluding appeal to the good-sense and taste of the audience is truly dignified. Another prologue, to the benefit-play given to Milton's grand-daughter, is likewise much superior to the ordinary strain of these compositions.

The Odes of Johnson have, I think, the same air of study, the same frigid elegance, which he has derided in those of Akenside. The sublimer flights of the lyric muse he has judiciously not attempted, conscious of his want of enthusiasm; his want of gaiety equally unfitted him for her sprightly strains. The pieces denominated from the four seasons of the year have little characteristic painting: he was, indeed, precluded by corporeal defects from any lively perception of the

imagery of rural nature. The translation of Anacreon's "Dove" is, however, very happily executed. Cowley would have done it with scarcely more ease, and with less elegance.

There is one piece, written, too, at an advanced age, which may be produced as an example of perfection in its kind—I allude to the stanzas on the death of Levett. I know not the poem of equal length in which it would be so difficult to change a single line, or even word, for the better. The subject supplied matter neither for sublimity nor pathos: the mature decease of a man in obscure life, and with no other quality than humble utility, was to be recorded; and who but Johnson could have filled such a meagre outline with such admirable finishing? Every line is a trait of character or sentiment. What a picture of life is given in the following stanza!

In misery's darkest caverns known,
  His useful care was ever nigh,
Where hopeless anguish pour'd his groan,
  And lonely want retir'd to die.

I confess,

I confess, that much as I admire the flights of a poetical imagination, it is these sober serious strains to which at present I recur with most delight. Your taste may reasonably be different; yet I trust in the solidity of your understanding to lead you to set a just value upon that verse, which, while it gratifies the ear, also touches and meliorates the heart.

Farewell!

LETTER XX.

I AM tempted, my dear Mary, for the subject of a concluding letter, to desert the collection in which we have been so long immersed, and direct your notice to two very modern poets, whose reputation, now sealed by death, justly recommends them to every lover of the Muses: these are BEATTIE and COWPER.

The "Minstrel" of the former, his principal performance, is a fancy-piece, the theme of which is the supposed birth and education of a poet. The name of *Minstrel* is not very happily applied; since the character described widely differs from that musical songster of a rude age; nor can we find any "Gothic days" which suit the circumstances of the tale. In fact, the author's plan is crude and incongruous; and the chief value of his performance consists

in descriptions and sentiments addressed to the feelings of all who have a perception of natural and moral beauty, apart from any particular appropriation. There is, however, something very pleasing in the portrait of his Edwin, who was "no vulgar boy," but is represented as marked from his cradle with those dispositions and propensities which were to be the foundation of his future destiny. I believe it would be difficult in real biography to trace any such early indications of a genius exclusively fitted for poetry; nor do I imagine that an exquisite sensibility to the sublime and beautiful of nature is ever to be found in minds which have not been opened by a degree of culture. Yet there is a seeming probability in the contrary supposition, which may very well serve the purpose of fiction, and it leads to some beautiful description of natural scenery.

The measure chosen by Beattie is the stanza of Spenser, which he manages with great address and seeming ease. Its Gothic

origin

origin and pomp of sound are the reasons he gives for adopting it. I have little doubt, however, that its employment by Thomson in his Castle of Indolence principally suggested it to him, for many of his strains closely resemble those of that work.

Among his landscape-paintings, one of the most novel is that of a misty day viewed from an eminence:

And oft the craggy cliff he lov'd to climb,
When all in mist the world below was lost.
What dreadful pleasure! there to stand sublime,
Like shipwreck'd mariner on desert coast,
And view th' enormous waste of vapour, tost
In billows, length'ning to th' horizon round,
Now scoop'd in gulfs, with mountains now emboss'd!
And hear the voice of mirth and song rebound,
Flocks, herds, and waterfalls, along the hoar profound!

His description of "the melodies of morn" is a delineation of sounds which may be compared with that already quoted from Goldsmith. The subsequent fairy vision, though painted with much beauty, is too splendid and artificial for the fancy of an

an untutored youth, who, without being conversant in books, could form no conceptions of that kind. It may also be remarked, that Edwin is too early made a philosophic reasoner: but Beattie was impatient for occasions to express his detestation of "Pyrrho's maze and Epicurus' sty," so that he has anticipated in his first book what properly belongs to the second. Of the first, it is the business to feed young Edwin's fancy, and lay in stores for poetical imagery; he is therefore rightly represented as delighting not only in all the grand and striking scenes of nature, but in every species of fiction which awakens the curiosity and interests the feelings. He has also that love for solitude and disposition to melancholy which are usually supposed the attendants of genius. To these are added a taste for music:

The wild harp rang to his adventurous hand,
And languish'd to his breath the plaintive flute.

Of this connexion between music properly

perly so called, and the music of verse, I have already more than once expressed my doubts; yet it is an idea in which the mind readily acquiesces.

At the opening of the second book an education of the young poet commences, the reverse of the former; for fancy is now to be corrected and controlled by truth. "Perish the lay that deadens young desire" is no more the maxim of the instructor, and the youth is to be taught that hopes are made to be disappointed, and that what seems good in the world is not really so. The manner in which this change is brought about, it must be confessed, does no credit to the author's invention. Edwin strays to a lonely valley (beautifully described), in which resides that convenient personage, a hermit. Him he over-hears telling himself his own story in a long soliloquy, in which the vanity of worldly pursuits, and the vices that haunt the public scenes of life, are displayed. Edwin is shocked at the recital,, and an uneasiness takes pos-

session of his breast which can only be dispelled by a conference with the sage. At a second visit he ventures to introduce himself, and the hermit is so pleased with his ingenuous temper, that he adopts him as a pupil. The business is now in a right train; for although the scene is laid in Gothic times, it is easy to invest the solitary with all the wisdom and all the knowledge that books and contemplation can supply. The course of instruction through which the pupil is led does honour to the writer, and proves that *his* mind was well stored and cultivated. First, "the muse of history unrolls her page," and many excellent observations are deduced from her lessons. Philosophy next succeeds, accompanied by Science:

And Reason now through Number, Time, and Space,
Darts the keen lustre of her serious eye,
And learns, from facts compared, the laws to trace,
Whose long progression leads to Deity.
Can mortal strength presume to soar so high!
Can mortal sight, so oft bedimm'd with tears,
Such glory bear!—for lo, the shadows fly

From

From nature's face; confusion disappears,
And order charms the eyes, and harmony the ears.

These fine lines are succeeded by strains equally elevated, in which the progress of the youthful mind to knowledge, virtue, and refinement, is beautifully developed. But when the accumulated stores are to be applied to the purpose of forming the finished poet, the work abruptly concludes with the pathetic lamentation of a lost friend; and we are led to suppose that the sudden stroke overwhelmed the poet's powers, and extinguished his flame. Probably, however, he had proceeded as far as he saw the way clear before him, and felt that pursuing the theme further would involve him in difficulties which he was afraid of encountering.

From the freedom with which I have commented upon the plan of this poem, you will perhaps wonder that I have selected it as an object of particular recommendation; but there is so much genuine poetry and so much excellent moral in the detail,

detail, that I am convinced you will find your attention well employed in the perusal.

The great popularity which the name of COWPER has obtained is a sufficient testimony to the merit of his productions, which were so far from appearing with any peculiar advantages, that his first publication had nearly sunk under the dislike attached to a narrow and gloomy system of religion. The lamented author passed his life in an obscure retreat from the world, doubly darkened by the shades of a morbid melancholy; and nothing could have forced him upon the public view but a blaze of genius not to be repressed by unfortunate circumstances. His works are now become an inseparable part of the mass of approved English poetry, and they could not fail to engage your notice without any care of mine to point them out. I cannot hesitate, therefore, to include among the subjects of my observations, an author who sooner or later must come into your hands, and has

so good a claim to the reputation he has acquired.

The pieces principally composing the first volume of Cowper's poems are arranged under the heads of Error, Truth, Expostulation, Hope, Charity, Conversation, and Retirement. These topics are treated in a familiar and desultory manner, with a continual reference to those religious principles which are commonly termed methodistical; and a vein of severe rebuke runs through them, which the author himself afterwards admitted to be too acrimonious. Yet in the midst of his doctrinal austerity, a truly benevolent heart is perpetually displaying itself, joined with a noble spirit of freedom and independence. Keen and sagacious reflexions upon life and manners, and frequent sallies of genuine humour, are interspersed, which must be relished by readers who are no friends to his system of divinity: yet even the latter in many instances stands apart from peculiar doctrines,

and

and presents only sentiments of pure and exalted piety.

The verse is heroic couplet, generally of a loose and careless structure, and the diction is for the most part simple and prosaic. There are, however, strains of poetry wrought with care, and glowing with the fervour of genius. An air of originality pervades the whole; and though well acquainted with classical literature, no writer is less of a borrower. All the pieces under the enumerated heads will amply repay the perusal: but you will perhaps find most to please you in those of Charity, Conversation, and Retirement. In the first of these are some admirably energetic lines against the slave trade, which was an object of his rooted abhorrence. The "Altar of Liberty" is a fine fancy-piece; and the idea of venerating the Power by what may be called the anti-sacrifice of letting fly "A captive bird into the boundless sky," is a most happy conception.

"Con-

"Conversation" abounds with excellent sense and humour. You will be diverted with the picture of the formal visiting party, where,

> The circle formed, we sit in silent state,
> Like figures drawn upon a dial-plate;

and from which,

> The visit paid, with ecstasy we come,
> As from a seven years' transportation, home.

Of the serious parts, you will, doubtless, distinguish the Disciples at Emmaus, as a story told with the grace of true simplicity.

The exquisite representations of the Melancholy Man, in "Retirement," were too faithful copies of what the writer saw and felt in himself. How poetical, and how touching, are the following lines!

> Then, neither heathy wilds, nor scenes as fair
> As ever recompensed the peasant's care,
> Not soft declivities with tufted hills,
> Nor view of waters turning busy mills;
> Parks in which art preceptress nature weds,
> Nor gardens interspers'd with flow'ry beds,

Nor gales that catch the scent of blooming groves,
And waft it to the mourner as he roves,
Can call up life into his faded eye,
That passes all he sees unheeded by:
No wounds like those a wounded spirit feels,
No cure for such, till God who makes them, heals.

These pieces, as I have before hinted, were little known or noticed, till the appearance of the second volume of Cowper's poems, chiefly occupied by "The Task." This production seemed instantly to captivate the public favour, and the fame of the *new poet* rapidly spread throughout the kingdom. Perhaps no poetical work unconnected with temporary topics ever acquired more readers in an equal period. It is a composition in every respect unique. From a *task* of writing verses upon a sofa, sportively set by a lady, it has swelled to a poem of five books, each distinguished by a separate title, but unrestricted to subject or method. The matter consists of description, chiefly rural, intermixed with moral and religious sentiment, and por-

traitures of life and manners, altogether forming a varied tissue, of no certain pattern or design, but extremely rich in original thoughts and poetical beauties. The writer's theological tenets and satirical vein are sufficiently manifest throughout the work, but they appear more softened than in the former volume.

The delineations of natural objects in the "Task" are all copied with great accuracy from nature, and finished with minute delicacy. They would resemble the Dutch style of painting, did not the writer's elegance of taste generally lead him to select only such objects as are capable of pleasing or picturesque effect. The circumstances and appendages are often, indeed, little in themselves, but they wonderfully contribute to the truth and liveliness of the draughts. The picture of the woodman and his dog, which has been happily transferred to the canvas, may be taken for an example of his manner.

The "Task" is judiciously composed

in blank verse, the freedom of which coincides with the unlimited range of the matter, and the familiarity of the diction. The modulation is generally careless and unstudied; but where he thought it worth his while, he has shown himself a master of the melody of which this species of versification is susceptible. The language may sometimes appear below the poetical standard; but he was such a foe to affectation in any shape, that he seems to have avoided nothing so much as the stiff pomposity so common to blank verse writers. That he was capable of any degree of elegance and true elevation, he has proved by numerous instances where the subject demanded those qualities. The particular passages in the several books which deserve to be dwelt upon are so numerous, that I shall not attempt to point them out, but leave to you the pleasing task of marking such as suit your own taste; and I doubt not that, in the course of frequent perusals, you will suffer none of the beauties to escape you.

There

There are not many examples of the exercise of those higher powers of the fancy which invent and create; yet his personification of Winter in the 4th book may be cited as one of the most poetical and well-wrought fictions of the kind. The idea of seating him upon a sledge-chariot, driven over the ice by storms, is beautifully grand. The allegory of Discipline is admirable, but can scarcely be called a formation of the fancy, since his figure and ministration are entirely human.

The miscellaneous pieces which contribute to fill the two volumes are all possessed of some appropriate merit, and display the versatile talents of the author. Who has not laughed over John Gilpin, or sympathised with Selkirk? The most important of these detached pieces is "Tirocinium, or a Review of Schools," which a parent cannot read without many serious reflexions. These will not at present much interest you, but you will be touched with the pathetic address to the father just on the

point

point of sending his son to a public school:

> Now look on him, whose very voice in tone
> Just echoes thine, whose features are thine own,
> And stroke his polish'd cheek of purest red,
> And lay thine hand upon his flaxen head,
> And say—My boy, th' unwelcome hour is come,
> When thou, transplanted from thy genial home,
> Must find a colder soil and bleaker air,
> And trust for safety to a stranger's care.

It is in such domestic pictures of the tender kind that Cowper is inimitable!

If you wish to feel the full force of the simple pathetic, raised by no other art than the selection of little circumstances, which could only have suggested themselves to an exquisitely sensible heart, you must turn to the piece which has lately appeared in his "Life by Hayley," addressed to the beloved companion of so many years, his *Mary*, now reduced to second infancy. All the studied elegies and monodies that were ever written are poor in effect to this effusion.

I will

I will not close my letter without recommending to your notice a still later poetical publication, although I may incur some suspicion of partiality in so doing, on account of the relation in which I stand towards it as editor: it was, however, solely from an impression of its excellence that I was induced to undertake this office, the worthy author being totally unknown to me. This is the "Poems Lyrical and Miscellaneous of the late Reverend HENRY MOORE." They will not, perhaps, rank among the more original compositions in the language; but I am mistaken if they will not maintain a permanent place among the most splendid, the most melodious, the most elevated in sentiment and diction. The versification of the Odes is perhaps too void of regularity, but it abounds in strains exquisitely musical, and often happily adapted to the subject. The imagery is singularly grand, elegant, and rich, and both the sublime and the pathetic are touched with a master hand. Above all,

these

these pieces are characterised by that expansive glow of benevolence, that ardour of pure and rational devotion, which, when allied to genuine poetry, exert the noblest influence on the soul.

I have now, my dear young friend, completed my original design of pointing out to you such a course of reading in the English Poets as might at the same time contribute to form your literary taste, and provide you with a fund of rational and exalted entertainment. Of the value of such a lasting and easily procurable source of pleasure, I can speak from my own experience; nor do I think it less adapted to solace the domestic leisure of a female, than to relieve the cares and labours of masculine occupation. I am also convinced, that such an union of moral and religious sentiment with the harmony of numbers and the splendour of language, as our best poets afford, is of important use in elevating the mind, and fortifying it against those trials to which the human condition is perpe-

tually

tually exposed. Nor are the lighter strains without their value in promoting a harmless gaiety chastised by elegance and refinement.

That to your other accomplishments you may join every advantage of head and heart which mental cultivation is capable of imparting, is the sincere wish of

Your truly affectionate

J. A.

THE END.